

Wake up the Lions

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Today, I want to talk about the Why, the What, and the How of God's harvest. Let's start with the "Why". Right now, so many are in search of hope and are unable to find security "out there" in the world. When we can't find security "out there" there is only one other place to look—"within", to the kingdom of God that is not of this world. These are the souls ripe for harvest. There is a great need for warriors of God's love, peace, and joy. These laborers have firm roots in God, and aren't afraid to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is HERE, is present NOW and can be found by anyone.

There are three groups of people in our gospel story, and they correspond to three groups of people present in our congregation today. See if you can determine which group you best fit in this morning. At various points in my life, I've been in all three of these groups. The first group is represented by the 70 disciples sent out as laborers. This group knows the peace that passes understanding. They have experienced the work of God in their lives and hearts to such a degree that they can't NOT believe. They are the lions of faith. Lions on a mission to spread the awareness of the kingdom.

The second group are those whom Jesus and the 70 are praying to answer the call for more laborers. They are those who have found peace and know they are in the kingdom but aren't sure what they are to do with that inner knowledge. They want to serve, but don't know how or are frightened about the prospect.

The final group are the ones ripe for harvest, those still seeking for the kingdom. They are the sick who are being healed and those to whom the good news is being preached. Perhaps you are here this morning looking for answers and for hope. You're trying to find answers in God, even though you aren't entirely sure about how to find the kingdom or if it even exists at all. If this is you this morning, I've been there. During that time in my life, I clung tightly to a few lions in my life. If it weren't for those brave warriors of faith, including my grandfather, who shared the power of God in their lives, I wouldn't be where I am today. I then prayed and listened intently in my heart until my heart's soil was ready for the kingdom of God to grow within it. You are the "why" of the harvest, and, as in Jesus' time, the harvest is plentiful.

Now for the other two groups...the lions and would-be lions of faith, the laborers of the harvest. Speaking of lions, since I was six years old, my favorite movie has been The Lion King. I loved it so much that I imagined walking down the aisle at my wedding to "The Circle of Life".

The movie is deeply profound on a spiritual level if you stop and soak it in. Child Simba was tricked by his uncle into believing he was responsible for his father's death. As a result, he spent a large portion of his life in the jungle with a meerkat and warthog, running away from his

place in His Father's Kingdom. He, like so many of us, had lost his faith and was stuck in a place of fear and shame, unaware of His father's love for him and His deeper calling.

Luckily, Rafiki, the baboon mystic, knocks some sense into the young lion. In what is my favorite scene of the movie, the young adult Simba chases Rafiki to the edge of the water, looks in, and sees his reflection morph into the image of His father, Mufasa.

In that powerful moment, as Rafiki wisely points out, Simba realizes that His Father was inside of him all along—that he had never lost his dad. He just needed someone to show Him where to look.

But his father, Mufasa didn't leave him there. Mufasa's form next appears in the sky and calls Simba from a place of complacency to a place of mission. Mufasa proclaims to his son, "You have forgotten who you are. You have forgotten who you are and so have forgotten me. You are my son. You are more than what you have become."

This scene has guided me repeatedly in my life...There were times when I too doubted that God lived within me or was even there for me at all. And there were even more times when I shied away from who I was in Christ and how I was called to serve Him. Today's gospel is calling us to remember that we are more than what we have become. That God's plans for us are so much greater than those we have for ourselves. And that the "Why" of God's harvest is calling us from a place of separation with God to a deeper awareness of His presence within us, and from a place of complacency to becoming a Lion of God, active in the harvest.

Luke 10 gives us some more details about the "what" of this mission God is calling us to. God is calling us to a two pronged mission. First, we are called to heal the sick. Though I believe strongly in physical healing, Jesus himself repeatedly points to a more important healing than that of the body. When he healed the paralytic, Jesus first told the paralyzed man that his sins were forgiven. It is far better to have a broken body and a soul at peace with God than a perfect body and a heart that feels far from the love of the Father. We are called to give others the gift of the knowledge of God's unconditional love.

Secondly, we are called to announce the presence of the Kingdom of God. God is with us, here and now, even in the "mess". Our brains are hard-wired to see the negative. We can be in a field filled with 10,000 adorable puppies with a single king cobra and we are going to see the cobra and flip out. Biologically-speaking, that helps us survive. However, that isn't the mindset of the kingdom. God's spirit gradually renews our mind so that, though we aren't blind to the cobra, we focus only on what is, as Philippians 4:8 declares, true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. We'll get back to how to deal with the cobra later. For now, healing the sick and announcing the presence of God's kingdom are the "what" of the harvest. This leaves us with the "how".

The how starts with prayer.

therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

Why would Jesus ask the laborers themselves to pray? Besides the obvious “to bring in more help,” there are two other good reasons for this command. The first is that prayer changes our hearts. When we pray for God to work on behalf of a cause we care about, we also are increasing the passion we have for it in our own hearts, thus readying ourselves for ministry. In the Greek, the word for “send out” is closer in meaning to “shove out the door”, it has the implication of using force. This reminds me of the first day of each of my boys’ preschool, when my three year old sons were unwilling to leave me and enter the classroom for the first time. There was a loving “shove” that happened to get them over that threshold to what ended up being a wonderful experience for them.

You are more than what you have become. Do you need a loving shove from God to take that first step into the unknown of ministry? The very first time I spoke in front of you at one of the Lenten reflection nights more than two years ago, I needed one. Jesus is asking us to pray for courage. “God, I need a kick in the butt to do this. I’m scared out of my mind, but I know this is your will. Can you shove me in the right direction?”

The second reason for asking the 70 to pray is to remind them of who lives within them. “You have forgotten who you are, and so you have forgotten me. Who are we? We are living Temples of our heavenly Father, and it is the Holy Spirit who lives and works in and through us. It isn’t about us. Prayer points the focus away from ourselves and onto the Lord of the harvest, the One who makes all this possible.

This theme comes around again in the second half of our gospel reading. Jesus warns the disciples that when the message is rejected, it is Jesus the people are rejecting, not the messengers. And when the disciples are successful, casting out demons in his name, something that is above and beyond what they expected, they ought to keep their joy rooted in who they are in God, not in the really cool things that God is doing through them. Again, it’s not about us! Yes, God uses your distinct personality, and your life’s story. However, ultimately it’s not YOU others they accept or reject; they are accepting or rejecting God. If we can take ourselves out of the equation and make it about God’s message, we become unshakable.

If we begin to feel burnt out in mission, it’s probably because we are making it about us, not about God. As soon as we focus on what others think of “us” and “our” success or failures, we are separating ourselves from the perfect power of God that makes everything work. Be confident in the value of the message and the giver of that message.

One more piece that will help with this: remember that Jesus was sending the 70 out ahead of himself. They would pave the way, preach, and heal. Jesus would then follow in behind, the people already prepared for him, to expand on what the disciples already opened up in their hearts. The same is true for our ministry. When we go out and spread the word, Jesus comes in behind us. He works through us, then through those who come after us, all while working directly through the Holy Spirit. So, don’t think about the ultimate end result. Don’t sit around

wondering if you did enough. Let God handle it. He comes in behind you to seal the deal. You, like John the Baptist, are there to make the paths straight for your Lord.

With regards to the “how” of our calling, so far we have prayer and shifting the focus from us back to God. There are two other important pieces of the “how”. In our reading today Jesus demands absolute dependence of the disciples on God’s provision. They are to bring nothing with them but the clothes on their back and the shoes on their feet. Interestingly, in Luke 22:35, Jesus asks his disciples if they ever lacked anything on their missions when he asked them to travel in this way and their answer was a clear: “No, never!” God has you. You are doing His work, and he will provide everything you need to carry you through.

The last direction of the “how” is the command to not talk to anyone on the road. Now, Jesus wasn’t saying “ignore people”. Rather, he was urging the disciples to stay 100% percent focused on the mission. It’s akin to his command to not put a hand to the plow and look back. We are to be completely focused on what God is asking us to do, whatever that is. To remember, once again, that we are more than what we have become and to keep our eyes on the mission.

Since we’ve been talking about lions, it would be remiss of me to ignore the head of the lions. Jesus himself is called the Lion of Judah. The word Lion elicits the feeling of power, and protection of the tribe. As the Lion of Judah, Jesus is fiercely protective of us, and he fights the enemies in our lives. Now, where does Jesus’ power lie? “Judah” is the tribe in which the city of Jerusalem resided. But Judah in Hebrew means “praise.” And so, Jesus is, quite literally, the Lion of the Praise of God. It is His devotion to/praise of God that makes Him so powerful. Jesus always remembers who He is. We too are called to be “lions” of praise—strong in what we believe, willing to declare what God has done in and through us, focused on pointing others to the presence of God in the world and within them.

Today, I challenge you to share the story of how God has worked in your life with at least 10 other people. These can be other Christians, the young people in your life, those who don’t know what they believe, or those from another faith background. When we are speaking to those from other faith backgrounds, it isn’t about conversion but rather about empowering each other to put our faith in the God who holds us all and to bring goodness to our world together.

We are to fight together to protect the goodness in this world and in each other. We are to wake people up to all that is good, praise-worthy, lovely, and pure. It’s there, in every single one of us, if we have eyes to see it. Remember the walk to Emmaus? Those disciples had Jesus right in front of them, and all they could see was the doom and gloom. Open your eyes, my brothers and sisters, and help others to open theirs. It doesn’t mean that we ignore the cobra in the field. But it does mean that we rally the 10,000 puppies together in the power and wisdom of God and let God do the fighting, when called for, through us.

Today, I’m calling on all of you to remember who you are. I’m calling you to step into your identity as a lion of God, specifically a lion of praise, a fierce proclaimer of the glory of the God

who lives within you. Because now, as much as ever before, we need hope. A vibrant, alive relationship with God brings hope. We need joy. A life walked hand in hand with God brings joy. We need peace. Jesus is the prince of peace. And for people out there to see the power that a relationship with God can give, people who may never see the inside of a church, you, lion of God, are needed. "You are more than what you have become." Are you ready to step into your power and purpose today?

The best way to point to the unconditional love of God and presence of God in the world is to be authentically, unashamedly you. Authentic love is beyond powerful. Since we are on a big cat theme today, let's end with a completely different yet authentic big cat, "Tigger" from Winnie the Pooh. You can imagine that energetic ball of fluff hopping around on his spring-like tail, grinning from ear to ear, singing "The wonderful thing about Tiggers is that Tiggers are wonderful things." Replace that word "Tigger" with "joyful Christian" and you really have something. God made you beautifully unique. Some of us are strong, serious, powerful Christians who bring levity and passion in a quiet way. Others of us might bounce around without a care in the world tossing joy out like candy at a parade.

So, go and be all that you are called to be, shine your light, share your story, and be authentically you. Heal the sick in body, mind, and spirit, and share the good news that God's kingdom is within the heart of everyone you meet. Then, when you come home rejoicing, trust God to finish the work you started, and give glory to the One who made it all possible.