

Publish or Perish 9-20-09
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Isaiah 52:7-10

⁷How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." ⁸Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. ⁹Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Preparing to Hear

It Only Takes A Spark

You've probably heard the expression, "publish or perish." If you're in the academic world, you haven't just heard of it, you've more than likely experienced it! The idea is that if you expect to stick around long enough at an institution of higher learning to get tenure, then you'd better get your writing, your research, your thoughts about your area of study published. Publishing is a way of letting people know that you have something worthwhile to say about an important topic

that will engage and help the greater good. Publishing forces a person to put their thoughts into some organized form and try to communicate the essence to others. Publishing is one way to hold a person accountable so that their thoughts or ideas or even experiments have some real connection to the world beyond the institution itself. That's the positive side. I'm sure those who are under pressure to publish are aware of some of the down sides as well, but the general idea, "publish or perish" makes sense.

If you think about it, if it weren't for the fact that the early followers of Jesus decided to publish, we may not be here in this sanctuary today. Fortunately, we have the gospel writers - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - who understood that in order to communicate the life-changing message of Jesus to those who didn't know him first hand, they needed to publish. They needed to write the stories down and share them broadly. Indeed, Luke begins his gospel (which, by the way, means "good news") in this way, "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled

among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, ... to write an orderly account for you most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed." The idea of "publish or perish" makes sense here, too, doesn't it? When you have good news, when you have something that rocks the foundations and transforms life and knowing and living in some profound way, it needs to be published! It needs to be shared!

With inspiring poetry the prophet Isaiah declares, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the one that brings good tidings, that publishes peace; that brings good tidings of good, that publishes salvation; that said to Zion, Your God reigns!" This may sound a bit strange to our ears, but you need to remember how communication worked in Isaiah's day. There was no posting to the internet or television broadcast. When something big happened, something that changed everything, it was given to a messenger to travel as fast as

possible and to announce (which is another meaning of the word publish) - in other words, to make public - the good news. "Fighting has ceased. Peace has come." The world has changed and new life is possible. How beautiful are the feet of the one who travels with haste to bring that news. Those feet are, not literally, but certainly metaphorically and poetically, beautiful. And if that message didn't get published, more people would perish thinking the fighting was to continue. Getting published matters! Indeed, it can be a matter of life and death.

Publishing good news of peace and reconciliation... now that's something people long to hear. Last week I talked about how it is that religion has gotten a bad reputation. Instead of being bearers of good news, it has too often felt like religion has become small and insular, promoting one way of thought, declaring all others wrong. Instead of publishing peace, too often religion has incited division, hatred and fear. It's time we change that. It's time we get into the publishing business. "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the one that

brings good tidings, that publishes peace..." Jesus came preaching the gospel - good news; good news of God's love that breaks down barriers between people, that heals the wounds of injustice, that shows compassion and brings humility rather than certitude and pride. We are on a journey; a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As followers of Jesus, we see faith as living God's reconciling and extravagant love in every situation as life unfolds along the way. As ones in a movement for wholeness, we need to publish the good tidings. We need to share the stories that transform life. We need to bear witness to the way that brings deep knowing and meaning and that rocks the world and shakes the foundation for good.

Am I starting to scare you? Maybe you've got images of street preachers or people standing on a corner handing out tracts. Maybe you are remembering the missionaries at your door last week or thinking of that awkward feeling you get when someone is trying to sell you something. Well, that's not exactly what I am talking about when I say we need to publish the good news. For about a year now, there

have been discussions going on in the board meetings here at First Christian Church, about who we are as a congregation and who and what God is calling us to be and to do. This has produced much very healthy and constructive conversation. But, just like in the academy, it can't be left at just talk. We needed to publish some kind of statement about who we are in order to have a starting point of engagement with ourselves and others. In our June newsletter - The Call - a statement was published for members and friends to read and think about and respond to. It was a "good news" statement meant to open ourselves and others up to journey together in the way of Jesus. The statement is not so much to define as to point in a direction; not so much to limit as to open up a vision. It is a way to engage each of us as well as a way to share with those who have not found their way to First Christian Church, but who might find connection and healing and inspiration here just as we have.

Between now and the end of November when Advent begins, I'm going to take a different aspect of that "Who are we?" statement each

week and focus on it in our worship. That will give us the opportunity to explore what it means and why it matters with some depth. And, at the same time, that statement is being distilled into a smaller statement that might be easier to remember and share. A couple of years ago, at a workshop for new church leaders, those present were engaged in a role play exercise. In that exercise each person had to pretend they were in an elevator with another person who asked about their church. They had about a minute to share words that painted a picture of who the congregation was and why they were part of it. I only heard about this exercise, I didn't actually have to do it, so I don't know for sure what I would have said. But have you ever thought about that? People are looking for deep connections to God and to people and to things that really matter and make a difference. It's not simply to feel good or to do what's expected. There is a longing, a desire to tap into something beyond ourselves, something that is timeless and yet real, not for a reward when we die, but for abundant life here and now. And isn't that where following Jesus takes us?

So how do we communicate that in a way that opens doors and invites people to "come and see." How can we share the message with people who have given up on religion? There are some leaders at First Christian who are working on ways to get the message out... we are very close to having a new website online with words and pictures to share who we are. Soon you may see signs on the side of buses in Ames with our logo asking the question, "Think God is bigger than religion? So do we." "Come as you are... you belong."

Another way to communicate with others is to engage the same methods as Jesus. Jesus didn't give answers, he told stories which invited the listener into the many layers of meaning and truth being expressed. We have stories to tell as well, not to say how good we are, but to illustrate what we value and how we try to live out our faith in a God who is both known and beyond knowing, who brings life and hope and healing. Stories like how it is that year after year we hold a Free Community-Wide Thanksgiving Dinner and end up having as many or more people volunteer from outside the church as from inside and

where people cross class and status and race and language barriers as we gather to give thanks and to share and to live a big vision where all are welcome and all are fed. Stories like the many lives that are helped and touched through giving food and gas vouchers along with a warm hug to speak a good news message about God's love that touches body, mind and spirit. Stories like deciding that we care about people not just here, but all around the world which compelled us to make the shift to fair trade coffee supporting companies and people who pay a fair and living wage to the workers so they can support their families. Stories like taking seriously our responsibility as caretakers of creation as we try to reduce the amount paper and energy and other resources we use. Stories about taking a trip to help victims of Katrina a few years back. Stories about praying for one another, and eating together, and encouraging one another through the ups and downs of life. Stories about giving room to explore what we believe and value and not getting stuck thinking we all have to agree. Stories about how we live out our motto, "Come as you are... you belong."

If we are to be in the publishing business, we need to remember and tell stories. I want to hear your stories. What difference has being here made in your life? What are the stories of connection to God, to one another, to the world that ground you and give you a sense of meaning and belonging and purpose and direction? How have you experienced and shared God's extravagant love and grace that is for all? If you can, write down your stories, email them to me, tell them to a neighbor, a friend, a stranger. Publish the good news. Just how is it that the God of love has come to you? Surely you want to pass it on.

Amen.