

“Deployed and Sent”
Isaiah 43:1-13 & Matthew 28:16-20

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

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As a teenager, I went to the Global Mission Conferences in Montreat, NC with my aunt Jane, and I loved it. I loved it so much that it scared me because I most definitely did *not* want to be a missionary. I didn't want to leave home. I didn't want to venture off to a foreign land (unless I could stay at The Intercontinental.) I didn't want to eat strange food or sleep in a strange bed or try to communicate with people in a strange culture.

But I was terrified that God was going to *make* me be a missionary. One night there was a talent show and a real live missionary with a guitar sang a song I'll never forget because it warmed my heart and reassured me. The song was “*Please Don't Send Me to Africa*” written by a man named Scott Wesley Brown. The disconcerting part was that he *had* been sent to Africa. What did this mean?!

Back in those days at Montreat, new missionaries would be officially “commissioned” every summer. They would stand in a long line on a stage and I remember studying their faces and the way they stood up there with their arms folded or their hands in their pockets, trying to read them:

- *Were they scared?*
- *Did they have a level of faith that I had simply couldn't imagine?*
- *Or did they simply like the idea of **world travel**, and serving as missionaries was all about the adventure?*

I watched them with terrified curiosity, worried that if I seemed *too* interested, their calling might be contagious. Yikes. Wouldn't want that.

Being *sent* into the mission field sounded a little like being deployed in the military. Many of you know what *that's* like. By definition, “to deploy” means “to position troops in readiness for action” or “to distribute persons strategically.”

There is a website for anyone seeking a sense of solidarity with our deployed troops - listing 40 things we can do at home to “pretend” that *we too* have been deployed. Here are just a few if we want a taste of what it's like:

- 1) Sleep on a cot in the garage.
- 2) Replace the garage door with a curtain

- 3) Put lube oil in your humidifier instead of water and set it on "HIGH" for that tactical generator smell.
- 4) Leave a lawnmower running in your living room 24 hours a day for proper noise level.
- 5) Have the paperboy give you a haircut.

The truth is that I know several soldiers and sailors who feel distinctly *called* to serve. When asked about serving, they don't mention the noise or the sleeping conditions. They simply ask for our support and prayers.

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You might have noticed that there is a theme to this Sunday. Today, we are saying "good-bye" to a long-time member of this church, who is moving out of the area to start a new life in the land of peaches and *Gone With the Wind*. We are sending her out, with God's blessing, to begin an adventure.

Today we baptize yet another beautiful child and it marks the beginning of his life in God's family. We are sending him out into the world buoyed by the promises of his family and *this* family of faith.

Today, a young woman will confirm the baptismal promises *her* parents made for her many years ago. And we will send *her* out today as a new minister of Jesus Christ with a fresh purpose.

And one more milestone of note: you are sending *me* out on sabbatical for thirteen weeks.

It was only fitting, then, for us to look at the last chapter in Matthew's gospel, when the resurrected Jesus met his disciples up on a mountaintop and commissioned them just as surely as the missionaries in the NC mountains in Montreat were commissioned not so long ago.

We say Jesus' words as the introduction to every baptism:

All authority is heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son

and of the Holy Spirit,

and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Jesus was sending *his* disciples out to reach *other* disciples. To say he was sending them, though, sounds a bit too casual. People get “sent” on errands –to pick up a loaf of bread, to mail a letter.

Maybe we should say that Jesus was *deploying* his disciples to go out. He was positioning his “troops” for action. And sometimes that action would indeed feel like a battle. But this is what Jesus was telling the remaining 11 disciples to do. There was a *global* strategy:

- **Baptize** them. (Include them in God’s family.)
- **Teach** them. (“Disciple” simply means student.)¹
- **Remember** *who* you are and *whose* you are.

Whenever we are “sent out,” “deployed,” “commissioned” in Christ’s service, the assumption is not only that *we* will learn something, that *we* will get something out of it. Jesus is telling us here not *merely* to make *ourselves* better disciples. We are being deployed to make *other people* disciples, to *teach others what we know about God*. And in the process, we become more effective students of Christ ourselves.

So, how are we doing in this Great Commission? Not so well.

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I read recently about a pastor who asks every member to bring a cell phone to worship on Sunday mornings. And in the middle of the worship service, there is a time when *all* are asked to pull out their cell phones and call a neighbor who is not in any kind of church that morning and invite that neighbor to come to church with them the next week. Maybe it takes the peer pressure of everybody doing it at the same time. Or maybe it takes a pep talk to get up the nerve and being in a sanctuary full of people gives them the nerve to do it.

But that pastor has the right idea. His church has doubled in size over the past year.

We are not very good at making disciples of all nations. We are not very good at making disciples of our next door neighbors. We are not very good at sharing our faith. And most of us don’t realize that *this* is our primary purpose.

Many of us come into worship looking for peace or guidance or comfort or inspiration for *ourselves*. We need to be fed. We need to be fueled for the week ahead. We want intellectual and emotional and spiritual fulfillment for ourselves. (There’s nothing wrong with that.) The words of Isaiah are music to our ears. God *gets* us. God

¹The Greek word used here is *matheteuo* which means “teach” or “make disciples of.” “Disciple comes from the Latin *discipulus* meaning “pupil”, from *discere* meaning “to learn.”

would go to the ends of the earth for us. God knows we need to feel needed. We need to feel loved.

But we are sorely deficient as God's people if this is all about *us*. We are failures as Christ's followers if the inspiration stops with us. We are called to inspire others. We are called to go *to the ends of the earth* for *other* people. We are called to teach them about this God we worship, this God we turn to when we are in trouble.

How are we doing? When was the last time we talked about our faith without making it about *us*?

Every week, we pray for each other and we pray for ourselves. **How about today praying for the most secular person you know?** (Not like this: "Thank you Lord that I'm not as godless as so-and-so." But more like this: "Bless so-and-so today and help me to be the kind of person who displays the love of Christ in that person's presence.")

This is what Jesus was asking his disciples to do. And frankly, even *they* were a little hesitant. I love that Matthew tells us that the disciples worshipped Jesus, "but some doubted."² After everything . . . after Jesus had risen from the dead, after the risen Christ had appeared in many places – by the Sea of Galilee, in a locked room, on the road to Emmaus . . . **some still doubted.**

Did they doubt *Jesus*? Or did they doubt *themselves*? Did they doubt that they could actually *accept* this commission? Accept it or not – this was *their* assignment and this is *our* assignment:

You are being deployed to a foreign land. It might be in Africa or it might be in the Express Lane at Safeway standing behind a stranger who looks like she's lost her last friend. But God positions us strategically for action, giving us *openings to teach someone* about the Lord of our lives.

You are being Sent. Everywhere you go there will be opportunities to inspire other people, to offer words of healing, to lift them up. Where do we get the energy for this? Right here in God's profound Word to us. Right here in this holy meal.

The easy part is sitting in here and receiving a taste of divine encouragement. The harder part is offering a taste someone else.

Ask any *soldier*, ask any *missionary* and they will tell you that their experiences have changes them. (Even when we don't mean for it to be about us, God blesses us.)

A final word about leaving on sabbatical for 13 weeks – my expectation and hope is that I will come back a different person. And I will come back to a different church. This is what I anticipate finding when I return (not what I *predict* – predictions are just educated guesses). This is what I *anticipate*, what I *expect*:

² Matthew 28:17

- There will be **new members** I have never met. And they will join because they were attracted to your obvious faith in God.
- There will be **amazing music**. The new organ brings new opportunities. And summer is a great time to break out the flip flops *and* the breezier music as well.
- There will be **new mission projects** that were barely in the offing when I left.
- There will be **buzz** about how GREAT **Vacation Bible School** was.

As I stand here, I'm not exactly sure what I'll be doing on sabbatical. I have hopes of where I will go and what I will do, but I don't find out for sure until later this month if applications have been accepted and funds will be available. But what I do know is this: God will use whatever I do to serve God's purposes. God will be deploying me for ministry I cannot even imagine.

A final word about that Montreat Mission Conference. I am the pastor of this church because I went to those mission conferences with my Aunt Jane. On the night of my interview with my husband Fred to be co-pastors of this congregation over 16 years ago, as we were being introduced to the committee, the chairperson of that committee introduced herself by saying that she had been a member here for many years but that she had a house in Montreat, NC and she spent the summers there.

"Where is your house?" I asked her. "In Montreat," she said.

"Where in Montreat?" I asked her. "On Greybeard Road just past Assembly Inn," she said. I smiled and said, "I used to spend the summers at my Aunt Jane's house just down the road at the Global Missions Conference." Immediately we had a connection.

Little did I know that *going to those meetings as a teenager* would be connected to being sent to Fairlington Presbyterian Church. Little does Minnie know, little do Jackson's parents know, little does Emily know, little do any of us know how God will use what we do **now** with what we will be **sent** to do in the future.

What we do know is that God is indeed sending us. What we do with this deployment is up to us, but we will be judged accordingly. We can complain about the mattress and the noise. Or we can focus on our mission: to make disciples of all nations and all neighbors.

LET US PRAY:

HOLY GOD, BRING INTO OUR MINDS AND OUR HEARTS SOMEONE WHO NEEDS YOU TODAY WHO DOESN'T KNOW YOU. (SILENCE) USE US, WE PRAY, TO SEEK OUT THIS PERSON AND ANY PERSON WHO COMES INTO OUR LIVES, THAT WE MIGHT FULFILL THE WORK YOU'VE SENT US OUT TO DO. THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR SAVIOR. AMEN.