

“It’s Not About Us”
Matthew 2:1-12 & Luke 7:21-23”

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

First Sunday after Christmas – January 1, 2006

Note: The Sermons in January are based on the actions within The Great Commission of Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20): Go, Make Disciples, Baptize, Teach, and Remember. Today’s sermon focuses on “Go.”

We have a Jack Russell Terrier at our house, who – like most dogs – loves *to go*. She loves to go on walks. She especially loves to go on car rides.

Early one Saturday morning a couple of years ago, I needed to pick up a couple dozen Krispee Kreme Donuts for a church event and thought I’d made Scout’s day and let her go with me in the car. She bounded into the back of the van and we were on our way.

The great thing about the Krispee Kreme on Route 1 is that they have a drive-through window, so you don’t have to get out of the car. I pulled up to order three dozen hot glazed donuts, picked them up at the window, placed the boxes in the back seat – side by side so they wouldn’t slide around – and headed back to the house to drop Scout off before going on to church.

Scout usually makes her presence known in the car, either moving around or barking at other dogs she sees along the way. But on that trip home from Krispee Kreme, she was unusually quiet. And at a red light, I turned around to see what she was up to, and found her spread-eagled out on top of the warm donut boxes on the back seat with a huge doggie smile on her face. You know the look I mean. Dogs have a way of smiling from ear to ea, when they are especially happy.

Scout was sprawled on top of the boxes, mashing my fresh donuts with a look of complete satisfaction: her master had not only let her go on a car ride; she had also given her a fabulously warm, sweet-smelling bed for the trip. Clearly, Scout believed the trip was all about her.

Here on this first day of the New Year, as hopes and resolutions bounce around in our heads, it’s also clear that we sometimes believe our spiritual journeys are all about us too.

This is a good day to talk about “going.” Many friends and neighbors have clearly gone today. They’ve gone out of town for parties. They’ve gone to family. The very lucky ones have gone to Dallas or Jacksonville or Atlanta or Tempe to watch some football.

When Jesus stood on a mountaintop after that first Easter, and told his disciples to “Go” he was not talking about going to on a pleasure trip of course.

Jesus was sending the disciples out to “go” serve someone else. It wasn’t about them. He was commissioning them *to serve* something bigger than themselves. This was their spiritual purpose.

The Greek word that Jesus used in his Great Commission is the same word he used earlier in his life when he was first beginning his ministry.¹

Before Jesus started his ministry, the man we call “John the Baptist” was a spiritual leader in his own right with his own disciples and his own reputation as a fiery preacher. In fact, he was so fiery that some believed that he might be the Messiah. John was so fiery, so controversial as a preacher that Herod the king had thrown him into prison.² You can visit the ruins of this prison in Jordan to this day.³

Apparently – and perhaps because he *was* so famous – John’s prison experience was not without its small freedoms. While in prison, John was allowed to meet with some of his own disciples and there they told him about Jesus.

The word was that there was another prophet out there who had even raised a young man from the dead!⁴ John’s disciples visited John in prison and told him all about this, and so John sent two of them back to find this Jesus and check it out.

And so we come to our lesson from Luke’s gospel today. John’s two disciples approached Jesus and said, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Apparently, John’s disciples had actually witnessed a few of Jesus’ miracles: he had cured plagues and blindness and mental illness. But this is how Jesus answered the men’s question:

“Go,” he said. “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor receive good news.”

¹ The Greek verb *poreuomai* which means “to traverse, to travel (literally or figuratively); to go; to make or take a journey.”

² The Herod who had John arrested was not Herod the Great (who ruled during Jesus’ birth and had sent the Magi to find Jesus). This Herod was his son, Herod Antipas. John knew that Herod Antipas had married his sister-in-law, Herodias.

³ Machaerus is south of Amman, Jordan overlooking the Dead Sea to the west.

⁴ This young man was the son of “the widow of Nain.” See Luke 7:11-15.

And this is exactly what they did.

John the Baptist would have loved this whole notion of making New Year's resolutions. He was all about repenting and purifying oneself.⁵ How many of you have made resolutions for 2006?

According to press reports, the Top Ten New Year's Resolutions don't change much from year to year. For decades, they have remained essentially the same:

- Lose weight
- Stop smoking
- Stick to a budget
- Save more money
- Find a better job
- Become more organized
- Exercise more
- Spend more time with family
- Eat healthier foods
- Learn something new⁶

You'll notice, though, that all these plans are about us: our *own* health, our *own* finances, our *own* minds, our *own* bodies, our *own* feelings. Christians get a second chance to be more spiritual about their resolutions when Lent comes around in about two months. Common resolutions for Lent include:

- Read our Bibles every day
- Pray more
- Volunteer with a charity
- Attend Sunday School
- Give more money away
- Sacrifice coffee or chocolate or eating out

All worthy ideas. But still, even our spiritual resolutions are often about us: finding our own peace, working on our own relationships with God, feeling more purposeful.

⁵ According to the ancient Jewish historian Josephus in Antiquities 18:17, John baptized those who purified their souls by good deeds. Luke 3:7-14 spells this out for us.

⁶ This list was culled from a number of media/educational websites: Time Magazine <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1142293,00.html>, "About Pittsburgh" <http://pittsburgh.about.com/cs/holidays/tp/resolutions.htm>, Goals Guy Learning System http://www.goalsguy.com/Events/n_facts.html, University of N.C. Exercise and Sports Science Department Newsletter, January 2006, Volume 1, Issue 7 <http://www.unc.edu/depts/exercise/January%20Newsletter%202005.pdf>.

It seems that the best way to approach this New Year is to do what Jesus commissioned his disciples to do: Go! Get out there. The lessons today give us a couple of clues about *what to do* when we “go.”

For example: if we have ever experienced a time when Jesus cured us, when Jesus restored our sight, when Jesus steadied our walk, when Jesus lifted us from the dead, then we need to go out and tell somebody – not because it will draw attention to us, but because it will draw attention to *God*. It will honor God. It will spread the word that God has the power to make the changes we long for.

But here’s the problem: what if these words are empty for us? What if we’ve turned to God and nothing happened? We prayed, even on our knees but we were not cured. We are still blind or lame or dead inside. We are still plagued, still struggling, still poor. What if we haven’t noticed any Good News to go out and tell someone about? My hunch is that Jesus would still tell us to go out, but maybe not to tell the world what God has done. Perhaps – if we have seen no evidence of God’s healing powers in Christ – we need to try something else. Maybe we need to do what the Magi did. We must “go and search diligently.”

The Wise Men from the East were sent out by Herod the Great to search for the Messiah. But actually, *they were already searching* when they came to Herod, and he gave them the impression that he, too, was seeking a Savior for the purpose of worshipping him too.

But the truth was that Herod was calling himself “the king of the Jews.” He was not interested in worshipping someone else, especially someone usurping his power! His searching was all about himself –preserving his own authority and maintaining his own supremacy, so that he could destroy that power and move on.

One of the marks of great spiritual maturity, though, is the realization that it’s not about me, it’s not about you. It’s about God. It’s about honoring God. It’s about pleasing God. It’s about following The Great Commission of Jesus.

Military officers are commissioned. Musical works are commissioned. But something that impacts all of us, if we claim to be trying to follow Jesus, is that Christians are commissioned. We don’t just seek God, maybe find God, and then sit back and expect life to be spiritually gratifying for the rest of our days.

Jesus has commissioned us to go out there and do something. (The specifics about what we are supposed to do will be coming in the next four weeks.) But here we get some clues.

I spend a lot of time reading and thinking about The Church. This particular church will celebrate its 60th anniversary in 2007. But across the boards, throughout the world there is constant talk about *changes in The Church*. It's been happening now for about 50 years. But there is no doubt about it: the winds of change are upon us moving us to change the way we are the church.

Many, many people do not seek God in churches, because – *ironically* – church is the last place they would expect to find God. And it's true. Haven't you been to worship services where it's hard to experience God's presence?

I know a church in North Carolina that has a treasured heritage. A major college was founded by the elders of that church two hundred years ago. The cemetery is filled with major figures from the town's history. The building is beautiful. The grounds are impeccably landscaped. But there is no life there. Nothing is happening.

For years this and other churches measured their successes based on how much money they had, how much land they had, how many people they had in their choir or in their Sunday School or in their pews. It's no longer merely about size or numbers. It's about making a significant and sustainable difference in the lives of people around us in our community, in our city and beyond our city.

It's about realizing that we can't continue to do the same old things and expect different results. We especially can continue to do the same old things just because that's what *we* like. *We* are comfortable with a certain kind of worship, a certain kind of program.

We must get back to what Jesus said, to what the Holy Spirit guided the first Christians to do 2000 years ago. And the coming sermons in January will take a look at what was happening in the early church according to the book of Acts in the Bible.

Lives were changed. Paradigms were shifted. Assumptions were turned on their heads.

The first step was to GO. Get out there and notice what's going on in the community. What are people talking about in coffee shops, at bus stops, at PTA meetings? What are people worried about out there? Who are all those people moving into our area from other towns, other countries?

We will never know unless we go out there and take a look around. For the past hundred years, the church has created a space for itself. It was often a glorious space with gorgeous cathedrals, or in our case with beautiful colonial architecture. We created these buildings and then invited people in.

But this is not how Jesus did his ministry. Instead he went out – and commissioned his disciples to go out – to transform human lives. This building is merely a tool we can use, but it's not meant to be a wall between us and the rest of the world.

We want it to be welcoming and safe. But it's not meant to be a wall. It's meant to be a bridge to the world. I must say that we have a good record of opening our building for community use. Our doors are rarely locked. Our lights are rarely off. (And if you believe this is important and you still can make a financial pledge to support these things for the sake of the community and our ministry to the community, please do it today!)

So in closing, here's a New Year question I want us all to ponder: What can we do as the church that would cause people to marvel and say: "Clearly those people have found someone who can save us. The blind can see, the lame can walk, the lepers are clean, the deaf can hear. Even the dead are raised up again! Only God could do that."?

It's not about fulfilling our own needs. They will be duly filled in time, when we realize that our spiritual purpose involves going out to serve someone else.

Let us pray:

Holy God, you still lead the wise to seek you. You still work wonders of healing in our midst. Give us such faith that we would go from this place and searching – if we haven't yet found you – or sharing the news of your power – if we have experienced it in our own lives or noticed it in the lives of others. Give us faith and boldness and the energy to do this, through Jesus Christ our LORD. Amen.