

Preparing for the Harvest **Matthew 9:35-38**

The past couple of weeks I've been preparing for the Elders retreat, which was this weekend, and the annual meeting, which is coming up next week, and both of these involve looking at the upcoming year and seeking what God has for us as a church in 2020. So I've spent some time asking the Lord, "What do you want for East Lincoln for 2020?" The idea that has kept coming to mind has been the idea of preparing for the harvest, that 2020 is to be a year of preparation and I want to take some time this morning to talk about that.

One of the most important things we need to be doing as a church is reaching our community with the hope of Jesus. We are here for a reason and that isn't just to grow in our own faith; it's to make disciples of Jesus Christ in this area and a big part of that is making an influence among the spiritually lost in our community. This is the mission Christ has called us to as a church.

But one of the things I think we struggle with at times can be an attitude of indifference toward our neighbors when it comes to reaching them with the gospel. We live our lives and go about our business, doing the things we need to do – going to work, raising kids, working on the house and yard, going grocery shopping, and so on. And as we do this we interact with the people in our neighborhoods and communities and I'm wondering, what do you think about when you think about them? Do you think about their faith? Do you think about their relationship with God? Do you think about where they're going when they die?

There have been times when I've been tuned into this way of thinking, but it seems like I often revert back to an attitude of indifference. I just don't think about those things very often. I don't think about their salvation. I mainly just think about what I'm doing and where I'm going.

I've been reminded in recent weeks about how Jesus thought about the people around him and how different his thoughts were than mine. And there's a particular story that really stands out about how he thought about the people in Jerusalem. Jesus never lived in Jerusalem, but he visited there often and spent a lot of time there. And I think Jerusalem represents the people our society in a lot

of ways. I found a website called **Bible History Online** that helped me to understand what Jerusalem was like in Jesus' day.

(Picture) The city was the focal point of Israel. And it had been restored to greatness and grandeur in Jesus' day by Herod the Great. It rested on top of a broad mountain, surrounded by a thick wall that was about 4 miles in circumference. The population was about 25,000. The center and crowning jewel of the city was the Temple that stood much higher than anything else in the middle of a giant white stone platform. To the east the land dropped down into an uninhabited valley. To the south was the lower part of the city inhabited by the working class citizens with their homes, markets, and shops. This part of the city was dusty, crowded, noisy, and busy as people bustled about their business.

To the west was the upper part of the city where the rich and powerful Jewish families and high-ranking Roman officials lived. The streets were broad and organized and the people lived in spacious white marble mansions and palaces built around courtyards with elaborate gardens and pools. In the market there were shops that sold luxury goods and services. There was also a large theatre where wealthy Jews would watch the best of Greek and Roman drama.

Jerusalem was religious, affluent, modern, multi-cultural, socially diverse, militarily secure, and politically significant. So in a lot of ways it was a reflection of our own society at large. I think the people were in many ways similar to the people in our own communities. People that we see every day, but probably don't think about very much in terms of their spiritual condition. They're just people – neighbors, friends, classmates, coworkers – that's how we think of them. But most of us probably don't wonder about whether or not they're spiritually lost. We might think that way about our family members and loved ones, but probably not others in our community. Most of us probably don't think of them in terms of whether they will spend eternity in heaven or hell. So most of us probably aren't actively concerned. But Jesus thought about people in a different way.

Read Luke 19:41-44.

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side ⁴⁴ and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you.

And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

This is one of many passages where Jesus laments over the people of Jerusalem. When Jesus saw the city and thought about the people in it, he didn't respond with indifference, he wept. He wept because he knew that terrible judgement would soon be coming upon them. He knew that in just 40 years Jerusalem would revolt against Rome and Rome would respond by sending an army to subdue them.

That army built a secondary wall all the way around the city to keep anyone from entering or leaving. It was a common military tactic that when you were attacking a fortified city, the only way you could penetrate the city was to inflict a devastating famine. You stopped the food from going in and you waited. Once the food ran out, the people would suffer. They would starve and many would die. There would be bitter fighting within the city as people fought for survival. Thousands would die before the enemy even launched an arrow and the survivors would become weak from malnutrition.

That's exactly what happened to Jerusalem. Tens of thousands of people died and there was misery throughout the city. The Romans heaped up the earth around the city walls to build huge ramps and siege works from which they could attack and eventually breach the city walls. And when they finally broke through they slaughtered the people. According to Josephus the soldiers grew weary of killing the people so they took the remaining survivors into exile. The city was burned. The houses, buildings, temple and wall were torn down and there was nothing left. Complete desolation and carnage.

Jesus knew that was coming and he also knew why it would happen. It wasn't ultimately because Israel revolted against Rome. It was because Israel “did not know the time of their visitation.” In other words, it was because they rejected the Son of God who came to save them and instead they condemned him to die, crucified him, and persecuted his disciples.

So Jesus wept because the people in his society rejected him and he foresaw the judgment and misery that were coming upon them. Brothers and sisters, we have to realize that a greater judgment is coming for the people in our communities – people who have rejected Jesus, the Son of God who came to save them. All their

sins are upon their own heads and God's righteous wrath is pending. That's a huge sobering reality that most of us probably don't think about when we see people.

C.S. Lewis says something very powerful in the book The Weight of Glory: *"It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors."*

Oh that Jesus would give us a heart like his for the people around us... That he would awaken our hearts to see people like he sees them so that we will not look at people with indifference but do what we can to prepare for the harvest.

I believe there are still people in our neighborhoods and communities who will turn to Jesus for salvation. And because God is ultimately the Lord of the harvest, we have a vitally important part to play. We are the harvesters, and because of that, we need to do our part to prepare for the harvest. If we are not ready for a harvest of new believers, why would God send them our way? I've often thought how much I would love it if dozens of new believers would start coming to East Lincoln, but what would we do if God brought them here? Would we actually be ready?

When Jesus was ministering to the crowds of people, he talked to his disciples about preparing for the harvest. **Matthew 9:35-38** says, *"And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his*

disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'"

Jesus saw that the harvest was ready in their communities, but he also saw that the harvesters weren't. Preparation was needed before the harvest could be brought in. So his prayer request was that the Lord of the harvest would get his harvesters ready. How can that prayer be answered in your life in 2020? What steps can you take to prepare for the harvest?

It is my hope that God will lead us into a year of preparation in 2020. That we would care deeply about the people in our community and move forward by taking the next step to prepare for the harvest. This is something that farmers do every year. They know the harvest is coming and they prepare for it. They build grain bins, repair machinery, purchase needed equipment, and cultivate the soil.

What does God want you to do to get ready? I think for all of us it has to start with prayer – prayer for ourselves, that we would see people like Jesus sees them and see the opportunities he puts before us to share our testimony. We need his courage and strength to then step into those opportunities, so we also need to pray for the filling of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We also need to pray for the people in our circles of influence who aren't following Christ – pray that God would open their eyes to see the consequences of their sin and the forgiveness and freedom that Jesus brings. The Holy Spirit has to do the work of regeneration and we need to ask him to do that.

In addition to prayer, I think we need to be intentional to build friendships to love and care for the people around us. Jesus influenced people through caring for them and loving them and I believe he will do the same thing through us today. People need to experience God's love and compassion through you before they will believe what you have to say. What can you do to show them God loves them? Who has God put in your life that you can begin showing love to today?

Praying and loving – these are ways that every one of us can prepare for the harvest. And I want to take some time for us to do that right now. As the worship team is coming to the front, take some time to pray. Maybe the Lord has shown you something you need to pray about for yourself. And maybe he's placed someone on your heart that he wants you to pray for and love. Take a few minutes to do that as we prepare for worship.