

“Trailers”

Isaiah 65:17-25; II Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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Trailers. They're everywhere. I-84. I-684. I-91. I-95. They move the products and resources we daily take for granted. If you're traveling any distance for Thanksgiving this weekend, you'll see plenty.

But the “trailers” that came to mind as I read these scriptures, and that prompt today's sermon title, are not those. They are the ones we see in theatres: the coming attractions of new movies that precede the main feature. These scriptures talk about the coming attractions of what God is doing and what we are to do in response.

It's curious, though. Trailers, whether on the highway or in the theatre, follow whatever is pulling them. Isn't it backward to call the thing that goes before a “trailer?”

Well, yes. Years ago, trailers originally **followed** the main feature. Then promoters realized that people **left** after the main feature and didn't stay for the trailers. So they moved the trailers to the beginning of the show. People viewed them **and** the main feature. Promoters were happy. But the name didn't change.

It's backward, right? Call something that “goes before” a “trailer?” It confounds our expectations.

The thing is, God has a way of doing that, too. Generally in the Bible and especially in today's readings, God confounds our expectations. Maybe even this message. It's Thanksgiving Sunday, so you might have expected a sermon on gratitude. And it's Commitment Sunday, so you might have expected a sermon on giving to the church. And it's the Reign of Christ Sunday, so you might have expected a sermon on the Kingdom of God.

But if you looked at today's bulletin notes and the VISION 2025 emphasis, that emphasis is “Evangelism.” Why?

Because some of us think of evangelism too narrowly, as winning souls for Christ, or getting people to come or return to church, or prompting a particular expression of faith.

Yet the word “evangel” simply means “good news,” so “evangelism” is sharing good news. For those who might have expected a stewardship message today, let me simply say this: money follows mission. If we are clear about our mission—what it is that we do that will leave a gaping hole in the community and people’s lives if we’re not here and don’t do it—if we’re clear about that, then I believe the money will follow.

This vision of good news is what Isaiah promises in the reading from Hebrew scripture. Jerusalem, which previously was destroyed by foreign invaders, will again be a place where houses are built and inhabited, vineyards will bear fruit, and people will live long lives. There’s even a hint of Protestant work ethic in the prophecy, over 2,000 years before anyone ever heard of the Protestant work ethic! Here’s what Isaiah says:

*They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat...*

In other words, we all need to do our part to make the good news of God’s vision a reality. *“Nobody can do everything but everybody can do something.”*

That points toward Paul’s counsel in his second letter to the Thessalonians. His exhortation *“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat”* is quoted out of context so often that if we had a dollar every time it was quoted out of context, we wouldn’t have to work or worry about the church budget!

So if Paul is quoted out of context, what is the correct context? The Thessalonians, along with Paul himself, expected Christ’s return in glory in their lifetime. It is what Christians refer to as “the second coming.” This expectation of Christ’s return in their lifetime was good news for the early Christian community since it gave them hope in the face of persecution (more on that in a minute).

But there were two problems. First, Jesus himself said no one would know the day or hour when that happened, not even the Son, but only the Father. Second, it led to apathy. Think about it this way: your boss tells you to do something, but you know from experience that her boss is going to say something else. So you procrastinate because, hey, why do work twice. Some of the Thessalonian Christians said, in effect, *“Hey, Jesus will return soon, why work?”* This undermined the strength of the community, placing heavier burdens on some and unfairly removing them from others.

In a church this old—234 years as a community, 201 years “in this place,” 186 years in this building—there can be a temptation to think “*Hey, we’ve always been here, we’ve always made it through.*” So far. But as a Conference trustee for eight years, I personally took care of the logistical and legal responsibilities once a church decided to close. It was heartbreaking. My barber, Marion, is an active Christian and we talk about the struggle of churches today. When I told her that I witnessed the closing of churches, she was shocked. She couldn’t believe it!

But it can happen. Here. I say this not to frighten us, nor with thought that anyone, including the District or Conference, wishes to do so. It is instead to say that if we are not reaching out to others, if we are not sharing the good news, if we are not saying something along the lines of “*Do you have a church home? If not, why not visit mine?*” then we have given up the very thing we have control over: extending a welcoming invitation to others.

We love this church, both as a community and as a building. But Jesus reminds his followers in today’s Gospel that buildings come and go and being in community requires courage. While we may equate Jesus’ ominous warnings with events in our lifetime, he states clearly that those who say the time is now are not to be followed.

In some parts of the world there is persecution for being a Christian. We are a far cry from that here. What is close, however, is the gradual decline of Christian communities and the opportunity to testify.

New England Christians are notoriously private about their faith. So it was of interest to me to view a feature on News 8, New Haven focusing on the revitalization of Christian faith in our state. Whether that is a momentary blip or a change of direction after decades of decline, I cannot say. But it did make me curious about Jesus’ words in Luke that the persecution of the faithful would give them an opportunity to testify.

Friends, that opportunity is now! Now! I am not suggesting that anyone here become a “holy roller,” or whatever caricature of Christian disciple one thinks of when one thinks of sharing one’s faith. Nor am I saying that we should look for opportunities for persecution so we can testify. I **am** saying that if we don’t speak the name of Jesus, if we don’t invite others to experience what brings us here week after week, if we

don't extend love in words as well as in deeds, then we have missed extending an invitation for a life-changing encounter with Christ.

In fact, we talked about this in last Monday's adult study. There is always the possibility of hypocrisy, of course: talking a good game but not walking the walk. On the other hand, we can do wonderful deeds, but if others do not know WHY and IN WHOSE NAME we do those deeds, we are no different from any other community service organization. The plain truth is that we need to do BOTH: walk the walk and talk the talk.

In fact, the book of James says "Faith without works is dead" but our mentors in the experience of testimony remind us that "Faith without WORDS is dead."

So where does that leave us? If these scriptures today are about **good** news, what is it?

First, the good news is about the rule of a God who, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, creates a new heaven and a new earth. We are a people of hope, which is not wishful thinking, but based on faith in God who rules in love.

Second, the good news is Paul's reminder to not be weary in well-doing, or doing what is right. It is easy to become discouraged, which is why we need each other. And having each other can overcome much negativity and doomsday thinking. I am a firm believer that you cannot thank people enough. So do! Encourage one another!

Finally, the good news is about the chance to share what has been life-changing for us: in other words, to testify to the power of love revealed in Jesus Christ! What a privilege! What an honor! What a joy! Who have you told about our church lately? Who have you invited to our church lately? Who have you told about Jesus Christ, who lives the way of love?

And you and I both know that our world needs this. *"What the world needs now is love, sweet love; that's the only thing that's there's still too little of"* said the lyrics of a song decades ago. Thrice this week—once in our Tuesday mid-week evening prayer, once with clergy colleagues in Woodbury and Southbury, and once with an aide of a Member of Congress—I have wrestled with how to speak to the divisiveness of these times.

The answer gets expressed in various ways, but essentially the same: we have to find ways to love our neighbor, the one who agrees with us and the one who doesn't. That's backward and upside down to the ways of the world, which demonizes those with whom we disagree.

So let's start where we are....sharing with others why we're here, why it's made a difference in our lives, why Jesus Christ is "*the way, the truth and the life.*" (John 14: 6) Let's give our time, talent and treasure to the building up of this community of faith and platform for mission service at home and abroad. Let's "*bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*" (Galatians 6:2) And let's do it with glad and generous hearts, and with confidence that God reigns and will see us through. Amen.