

God's Not Dead 2, Week 1

Our Savior's Lutheran Church

September 11, 2016

Text: 1 Peter 3:13-17

Finding Faith at Ground Zero

The Search for Answers in the Midst of Life's Pain

I. Introduction

- Welcome to God's Not Dead 2, a sermon series based on the movie by the same title.
 - As you may know, there is a *God's Not Dead 1*,
 - which is a movie that tells the story of a college freshman who was challenged to defend his faith in front of his philosophy class.
- In the sequel, *God's Not Dead 2*, the drama switches from the classroom to the courtroom,
 - and we see the story of a high school teacher who mentions Jesus Christ in her response to a question about His teachings in her history class.
 - The high school student who asks the question has been searching for answers since her brother died,
 - a search that lead her to the Bible.
 - Her question in class is an effort to understand how Jesus teachings connect with everyday life.
 - Because of her honest answer, the teacher faces legal action that could cost her the career she loves as well as her respected position in the community.
 - It's actually a really good movie (and book), and, if you haven't seen it yet, I highly recommend you do (here at church, PPV, DVD)
- We're focusing on this story because it does a pretty good job of portraying the current landscape of our culture
 - in terms of the tension surrounding the public expression of faith.
- Not only that, it also deals with how evil and suffering create within us a search for meaning in the midst of pain.
 - This is something that affects us all—especially in the serious and dangerous times in which we live.
- For our generation, the world changed on 9/11/2001.

- Most of us can remember where we were when we heard the news or saw the haunting images of destruction and fear in New York.
- The place where the horrible attacks took place became known as “Ground Zero.”
 - It’s a place that evokes both memories of horrific acts and questions of great magnitude.
 - How could people do such horrible things? Why is there such evil in the world? “Where was God, and why didn’t He stop it?”
- The movie *God’s Not Dead 2* tackles this theme from the outset,
 - which is why we’ve chosen to spend some time exploring it.
- Not only that, but the movie also lifts up the real and present hope that is ours in Christ Jesus,
 - that regardless of what we’re going through, evil will not have the last word.
- That’s why the title of this message is “Finding Faith at Ground Zero.”
 - “Ground Zero,” in a way, is the place of greatest pain in our lives.
 - It can be either a stepping stone or a stumbling block in our search for God and meaning in this life.
- So let’s begin there; let’s take a closer look at how pain and evil affect us all.

II. The Search for Answers

- As daily news reports make clear, pain and suffering are real and play no favorites.
 - Earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, tragic accidents, disease, hunger, divorce, war, government corruption, economic uncertainty, racism, sexism, ageism, etc. –
 - this is the world we live in,
 - and sometimes some of that stuff hits pretty close to home.
 - And where there is pain and suffering, there is no shortage of people searching for answers.
- Rebecca Alonzo, author of the *New York Times* best seller *The Devil in Pew Number Seven*,
 - was only seven years old when she saw her parents attacked by an intruder.
 - She watched as the assailant was convicted, only to be let out of jail a few years later.

- Instead of turning against God, though, she turned to God for help.
 - She said, “I needed God more than I needed to be mad at God.”
 - By faith, she knew that God was not the source of her pain, but the healer of it.
- I once heard the advice, “Don’t run *from* God when you’re in trouble . . . run *to* God.”
 - And this is the essence of God’s grace.
 - When we feel we least deserve God’s help, God helps us anyway.
- This means that if you’ve run up against your own personal Ground Zero and answers to all of your questions just aren’t coming,
 - don’t shrink back or turn away from God;
 - instead, seek God all the more.
 - When you feel like life has thrown you off course and you’ve lost your way, whisper over and over, “I trust you, Jesus.”
 - A good time to practice this is on the small stuff –
 - like in the movie when Pr. Dave starts out his day by stubbing his toe, getting coffee spilled down the front of his shirt, and eventually dumping his coffee trying to get into his office – “I trust you, Jesus.”
 - And it’s good to practice, because the big stuff will surely come,
 - and that’s when we need to trust Jesus the most.
 - Remember, the Bible promises us, “Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened.”
 - No question is off limits.
 - No crisis is beyond God’s ability to help,
 - and God’s desire to help is unending.

III. The High Calling of Helping Others

- Now, one of the great mysteries of how God works to help those who are searching is that God uses people as instruments of truth and grace.
 - God speaks through us when we speak to others.
 - Listen to the way the apostle Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians:

“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.” (2 Corinthians 5:20).
- The thing is, though, is that each of us is prone to thinking that we can make it on our own.

- So many times, people don't ask for someone's help until they've become so lost that they're desperate.
- On the outside they may look every bit the part of a successful person,
 - but on the inside their soul is crying out for help, for mercy.
- Part of our calling as Christ's ambassadors, then, is to take the time to look, to notice when other people may be struggling,
 - and then to be willing to serve them in any way we can in their search for answers.
- In the movie, Brooke, the girl whose brother had died six months earlier, is searching for answers, but she's not alone.
 - Many helped her in her desire to know the truth, particularly another character named Martin,
 - who diligently searched for answers to his own questions.
 - In fact, when he first showed up to talk to Pr. Dave, he had a list of 147 questions!
 - Watch how he responds to Brooke:
 - **Take a look at the clip.**

IV. Giving Reasons for Your Faith

- Martin's desire to know the reasons for his faith not only helped himself,
 - but it also prepared him to help Brooke when she encountered her own personal "Ground Zero."
- And that's what we are called to do as ambassadors for Christ.
 - As we heard in 1 Peter, always be ready to make your defense to anyone who asks you to explain the hope that you carry deep within you.
 - Sure, at first, it's always best to minister to those who are in pain with the compassion of Christ by just *listening* and not *lecturing*.
 - There is no need to be defensive if someone blames God for all their problems and blurts out offensive statements out of hurt and despair.
- At some point though, they'll probably open up and be ready to listen to what you have to say.
 - And when that moment comes, simply help them see the bigger picture:

- that evil certainly exists in this world and, in many cases, we are powerless against it.
- At other times, it can be seen in our decisions, our actions,
 - and the suffering we and others experience is a direct result.
- But God, in Christ Jesus, has defeated the power of evil once and for all.
 - Therefore, our greatest hope lies in placing ourselves into God's loving embrace,
 - trusting in God's power and desire to forgive and heal and make whole again,
 - believing that God's grace will, in fact, win the day and deliver us from all that would harm us.
- To be sure, the best thing we can tell others is that God is not our enemy.
 - Instead, God's deepest desire is to defeat our greatest enemy.
 - so we put our trust in God.

V. The Hope of the Gospel

- And this is our greatest hope; this is the Good News:
 - that God entered into human history in Jesus Christ,
 - living the life we are called to live – a life in which he loved God and neighbor with everything he had –
 - and dying the death we all deserve to die – a death that leads to being separated from God's eternal love because of our sin.
 - Miraculously, though, Jesus rose from the dead, for he was/is the Son of God,
 - and now he grants forgiveness, life, and salvation to all who believe in him.
- In this is freedom, true freedom from even the deepest pain of all of our Ground Zeros in life,
 - because in Christ, God is overcoming the world,
 - and there will come a day when pain and suffering will be no more.
- It's true that many people want God to simply fix the problems in their lives,
 - but what they don't realize is that God wants to change them first,
 - to heal them from the inside out.
 - It may not seem like it's what they're searching for,
 - but it will, in the end, meet their deepest need.

VI. Conclusion

- Of course, on this, the 15th anniversary of 9/11, our thoughts eventually take us to reflect on what happened at Ground Zero in NYC.
- But there is another “Ground Zero” I want us to consider.
 - It’s the place where Jesus was crucified two thousand years ago.
 - The pain and suffering experienced there is far beyond what we can imagine or comprehend.
 - In fact, the Bible says that it was there that the sins of the world were placed upon one man.
- More than six hundred years before Jesus was crucified, the prophet Isaiah wrote:
 - *Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4–6)*
- When we look to the Ground Zero of the cross of Christ,
 - we see that our fear is replaced by faith,
 - our despair is replaced by hope,
 - and our hurts and pain are soothed by His healing mercy.
- It is there, and only there, that the world can find the peace it so desperately needs.
- Thanks be to God. Amen.