

LWML Sunday 2008 Sermon

“Opened Eyes ... Hearts Ablaze!”

Grace, Denison October 5, 2008

Luke 24:31-32 “Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’”

Among his fellow sailors, John Newton was known as “The Great Blasphemer.” He later referred to himself as an “infidel and libertine.” He was captain of a slave ship, transporting fellow human beings from their homes in Africa across the sea in chains to lives of servitude—if they survived the crossing. Newton was known to mock God and any who expressed their faith in God. Yet, whenever he got into a close scrape and narrowly avoided death—this happened on several occasions—he would try for a time to live a better life. This wasn’t out of any love for God; he was just trying by his own efforts to avoid damnation. But one close call was different. Moments after he had left the deck of his ship during a violent storm, the man who replaced him was washed overboard and drowned. Newton said it was then that he began to realize his own helplessness. He began to read the Bible. In time, he became a different man. He turned to Christ. He got married. He even became a minister and an active opponent of the slave trade. He also wrote these words:

*Amazing grace—how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see!*

I. God opens our eyes.

God opened John Newton’s eyes and set his heart ablaze for Jesus Christ. He may have been a blasphemer and a slaver, but he was no more sinful and no blinder by nature than any other human being. We live in a world full of people who are spiritually blind, who need opened eyes.

Some of those stumbling around in spiritual darkness are obvious. We can point to those with best-selling books who are vocal in their critical attacks on Christianity. Or, just watch “Entertainment Tonight” or “Access Hollywood” or “TMZ” to see what kind of a mess some celebrities and would-be stars have made of their lives. They are obviously stumbling around in the dark. Truth be told, you really don’t have to look any farther than next door, or down the street, or in your own families to find people in the dark and who need the Light of Jesus Christ. People who are blind to God’s Truth are nearby, and they may be people you know and love.

There was a time when each of us was spiritually blind as well. Those of us who were baptized as infants and raised in Christian families probably don't remember that time. Some of us do, though. Those who do remember the darkness may appreciate the light differently than those who don't remember it. Toward the end of his life, John Newton wrote, "When I was young, I was sure of many things; now there are only two things of which I am sure: **one is that I am a miserable sinner; and the other, that Christ is an all-sufficient Savior.**"

God opened John Newton's eyes. God opened our eyes. But sometimes, even Christians close their eyes. The **disciples on the way to Emmaus** could not "see" Jesus, even when He was right under their noses. Their faces were "downcast" when Jesus asked what they were discussing as they walked along the road (Luke 24:17). These two disciples weren't unbelievers or ignorant. They knew who Jesus claimed to be. They even knew about the report from the women, that they had been to the tomb and it was empty.

Still, they were downcast. And what does Jesus say? "He said to them, *'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?'* And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, *he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself*" (Luke 24:25-27). Through the power of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, God the Holy Spirit opens our eyes so that we can see Jesus. He then reminds us, *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light"* (1 Peter 2:9).

II. God sets our hearts Ablaze!

God opened the eyes of the Emmaus disciples so that they could see Jesus and realize who had been talking to them and teaching them, and who was ready to eat with them. How did they react? Did they simply continue their meal and retire for the night? No, they looked at each other and said, **"Were not our hearts burning within us** while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" Didn't we get excited when we heard God's Word? And then they ran seven miles back to Jerusalem to tell their friends that they had seen Jesus! It was already night, but they didn't even wait until the next day. That's how excited they were. God had used His Word to set their hearts ablaze.

Dr. Robert Roegner of LCMS World Mission shares one of his experiences in India. On a summer Sunday in 2004, after he had worshiped with a Lutheran congregation in Nagercoil, India, five pastors of our Indian partner church asked him to travel with them that afternoon to a village where a new church had been started. They were going to baptize the first new believers there. It was about a two-hour drive. When they arrived, they drove up to a tent-top with open sides that had been pitched for the service. Worship already had begun. About 250 to 300 were at worship. About 40 of them were to be baptized and were in the first four rows, dressed in white. When it was time for the baptisms, the five pastors jumped up. One grabbed a basin of water, one took the certificates, and another had a Bible. After the first person confessed his faith and said he renounced the devil and all his works, he pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and gave it to a pastor. The pastor looked at the paper and announced the man's name. Then another pastor baptized him in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

They went up one row and down another, baptizing those who were there. In the middle of the third row was a woman in her early 20s. She gave the pastor her paper. She had a little 4- or 5-year-old girl holding onto her. The pastor announced her name, and she was baptized. She began to cry. Then her daughter was baptized, and the woman cried even more. The pastors finished baptizing those in the third row, and she continued to cry. They finished the fourth row, and she was still crying. After the service, Roegner asked a pastor who spoke English to help him talk to this woman. They talked for a couple of minutes, then he said, "I couldn't help but notice after baptism that you were crying—a lot. I guess those tears are because you are so happy that you were baptized and have become a child of God."

She said, yes, she was happy that she is a child of God, that Jesus is in her heart, that she has received God's free grace, and that she has forgiveness for all the sin and bad things she had done in her life. This brought tears of joy to her eyes. "But," she said, "while I have tears of joy flowing from my left eye, I have tears of sorrow flowing from my right eye." So he asked, "Why so sad as well?" She looked him square in the eye and said, "While I have received Jesus in my heart today and His grace and forgiveness, my husband, my mother and father, my brothers and sisters, my aunts and uncles, and all of my cousins do not know God's grace and forgiveness because they still live in the darkness of all the Hindu gods."

Roegner shared with her 1 Peter 2:9—“*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*” He challenged her to not let God’s love, grace, and forgiveness be only for her and her daughter, but to go and tell her husband, her mother, her father, and her other family members about Jesus.

Roegner returned to United States, and kept her in his mind and on his prayer list for three or four months. As happens over time, other prayers came to mind and he forgot about her. In January 2005, he received an e-mail from the pastor who had done the translating for him. He was so happy to tell Roegner that he and the other pastors were returning to this same village on Easter Sunday afternoon and were going to perform at least as many baptisms as they had when he had been there with them the previous summer. And, he was excited to report that a majority of those Easter baptisms would be members of this woman’s family, including her husband and her mother and father.

This woman was spiritually blind, but God opened her eyes through the power of the Gospel. And His Word had set her heart ablaze! When she realized that God had called her out of darkness so that she could be a light to others, she acted. And as a result, many in her family also had their eyes opened and their hearts set ablaze.

Ablaze!, as you may know, is the name given to the movement among Lutherans worldwide to reach at least 100 million unreached or uncommitted people with the Good News about Jesus by 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Its name is taken from the account of the Emmaus disciples. It’s God’s Word that warms our hearts, that sets us ablaze to tell others about Jesus, as it did this young woman in India. And like her, we have also been baptized. Our eyes have been opened to the Gospel, so that through our lips and lives, the light of the Father may shine for all to see. You are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” What a privilege to be part of His mission!

The Lutheran Women’s Missionary League was founded for the purpose of “serving the Lord with gladness” by supporting Gospel outreach from local churches to the farthest corners of the earth. Untold numbers of people have been given the gift of faith in Jesus Christ through the

mission work that has been supported by mites from the women of the LWML. Countless others have benefited from the numerous acts of charity, the quilts, the gifts of food and clothing, all lovingly supplied by the women of the LWML. We thank God for their work today! God is truly at work in them! This is something for all the women of our church to be involved in.

We also encourage each other today, every one of us, to tell the Good News as we have the opportunity. By His grace and mercy, God has called us out of the darkness through the power of the Gospel. For the sake of the holy life and the innocent suffering and death of His Son, Jesus Christ, and sealed by Christ's resurrection, we are God's forgiven people. He has chosen us. He has made us His priests, declared us a holy nation, and made us His own so that we can declare the praises of the One who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light.