

Preaching the Gospel
Romans 10:1-17

We live in a visual age, an age of videos and videogames. But most Christian worship continues to be language based - songs, prayers, and sermons. Why is that? Are we just old-fashioned?

Well, old-fashioned or not, the Christian faith has been and continues to be based on good news - that's what gospel means, good news. And most of the time, news comes in words. Most of the time, news is a story.

Now, news can in fact include pictures. Last Sunday, just before worship, I got a text with a picture of a burning building. It was obviously old – red bricks with white columns – and the historian in me is always sad when part of our history is lost. But it wasn't until I read the accompanying description that the truth hit home: it was the sanctuary of College Hill Presbyterian Church near Oxford, Mississippi that burned. So you see, the story is the important thing - without the explanation, the picture didn't have the same impact.

The same thing is true where it comes to Jesus – pictures alone just aren't sufficient to explain the good news. For example, we've all seen crucifixes before – crosses with an image of Jesus hanging on them. Crucifixes thus illustrate in three dimensions the most important event in the gospel, the perfect sacrifice Jesus made for us. But imagine that you didn't know anything about Jesus. Imagine that you'd never heard a sermon or lesson about Him, and that you didn't have a Bible. If you saw a crucifix, what would it mean to you? Without the story, you'd probably get the wrong idea.

Of course, it's always possible to hear the wrong story. Muslims, for example, know some things about Jesus – the Koran calls Him "Isa." Many believe He was a prophet, and that He even worked miracles. But they don't think He was the Messiah, and certainly not the Son of God. In fact, the Koran teaches that it was someone else who died on the cross of Calvary – not Jesus.

In the same way, the ancient Jews who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' crucifixion didn't understand it at all. Like the modern Muslims, they knew Jesus commanded tremendous power – many of them had seen or even experienced His miracles of healing. But because He wouldn't lead them in an uprising against the Romans, they refused to believe He was the promised Messiah. That's why many of them mocked Him and ridiculed Him, saying they would only believe in Him if He came down from the cross. They saw the most important event in the history of the world, but drew precisely the wrong conclusion from it.

Now, make no mistake: even though they didn't know it, the ancient Jews had already heard lots of lessons about Jesus. The Old Testament prophets had given them the covenant promises of God, along with God's Law to explain how they should live. Moreover, many of those who saw Jesus die on the cross had come to Jerusalem precisely so they could participate in the sacrifices and rituals prescribed in the Scriptures. And all those prophecies and laws and ceremonies pointed, in one way or another, to Jesus.

But at the same time, so many of the ancient Jews misunderstood the fundamental meaning of God's Law and thus of all those rituals and sacrifices. For the Law was never intended to be a self-help program. Instead, it's supposed to make it clear that there's no way anyone can meet God's expectations of us. After all, the Law tells us that we must love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, holding nothing back from Him. The Law tells us that we must love our neighbors just as much and in exactly the same way that we love ourselves. Can any of us possibly do that?

In the same way, all those animal sacrifices in the ancient Temple were supposed to help people understand that death is the universal penalty for any sin, any rebellion against God, any breach of His perfect law of love. As Leviticus 17:11 clearly explains, “It is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.” In other words, the entire Law of Moses is supposed to show us just how serious and pervasive our sin is, even while it points us to the need for a fuller, a more complete, a more permanent sacrifice than any animal can possibly make.

But the people who saw Jesus die on the cross didn’t put all that together. Instead, as Paul says in the previous chapter, some thought they could save themselves by their works, by following the law and performing the rituals it prescribed. Others presumed upon the covenant promises God had made to their ancestors, believing that because they were the descendants of Abraham, God would save them no matter what they did.

And so, when the ancient Jews saw Jesus shed His blood on the cross, they didn’t understand why He needed to do that. Yes, they saw Him die, but they needed a more complete explanation of what it was they were seeing – they needed not just to see the cross, but to hear the story, the whole story, the true story.

And believe it or not, many modern people, even some who claim to be Christians, have the same need. Oh, lots of people are willing to admit that there is a God and perhaps even a coming Day of Judgment. But like so many of the people looking on while Jesus died, these modern folks have fallen into the trap of legalism, believing that they can somehow earn eternal life by being “nice” or “good.” Others fall into the trap of ceremonialism, believing that all they need to do is to follow a certain set of rituals or perform a certain number of good deeds.

And just as some of the ancient Jews depended on their physical descent from Abraham to give them assurance of salvation, there are plenty of modern folks who believe that just because they were baptized as infants, or just because they made a public profession of faith at some time in the past that they have nothing to worry about. Oh, they’ve seen the cross, and they may even know what Jesus did there, but they haven’t really grasped the depth of their sin and brokenness, and thus the amazing grace of God’s sacrifice on their behalf.

And that’s why it isn’t enough just to show people the cross, or even to show them the love of Jesus through our moral example, our deeds of love and mercy. No, that’s why Jesus sends His followers to tell the good news in words. That’s why Paul says in verse 17 that faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of God. You have to hear the whole story of Jesus if you are really going to have faith, if you are really going to trust Him.

And that just makes sense, doesn’t it? After all, why do we trust anyone? It’s not because of how he looks – the best-looking person could be a terrible liar. No, you trust someone because of what you know about him. You trust someone because of what he has done or not done, because of the way he has treated other people that you know. In short, you trust someone because of his story.

So, what is it about Jesus’ story that should lead us to trust Him? Look at verse 9, which tells us that we should trust Jesus because He is Lord, because He is the Son of God. And why do we believe that, even though it can’t possibly make sense to us? Look at verse 9 again – because God raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Christ proves that the Man Who died on the cross wasn’t a fake or a phony after all. The resurrection of Christ proves that everything He ever said about Himself was true. It proves that the word of God which Paul mentions in verse 17 is 100 percent reliable. The resurrection proves that Jesus is trustworthy.

But that’s not all. Given the truth of Jesus’ resurrection, trusting Him isn’t only reasonable. It also brings tremendous benefits. Look at verse 11. If we believe in Him, if we trust in Christ, we will not be put to shame – none of our shameful thoughts or words or deeds will be held against us. And that’s because verse 9 says that if we confess that Jesus is God and

submit to Him as our Lord, trusting in the truth of His resurrection, we will be saved. Verse 13 repeats this idea with a quote from the prophet Joel – if we will call on the name of the Lord Jesus, calling out to Him to save us from our sins, He will do just that.

Yes, the death and resurrection of Christ – that’s the ultimate response to the legalists who are trying to earn their own salvation, as well as to the skeptics who deny the identity of Christ. The cross and the empty tomb are the final answer to those who place their trust in following certain rituals as well as to those who deny the existence of the supernatural.

Moreover, once we understand the true story of Jesus, who can doubt that this is the best news of all? In order to be saved from our sins, we don’t have to keep God’s law or follow a set of rituals perfectly; after all, we can’t do that anyway. We don’t have to be part of a certain ethnic group. We just need to trust Jesus to save us. We just need to call out to Him to help us, confessing Him to be the Lord as well as our Lord.

But here’s the problem: why should we call out to Him to save us unless we know we need to be saved? How can we call out to Him unless we trust that He is able and willing to save us and that He has promised to save us? How can we confess Him as Lord, submitting ourselves to Him as our King unless we trust Him? No, trust in Jesus must come before we can call out to Jesus. Trust must come before confession.

Okay, so how can we trust Jesus unless we know the truth about Him? How can we trust Him unless we have heard His promises? How can we trust Him unless we understand the meaning of His cross and His resurrection? No, knowledge must come before trust, just as trust must come before confession.

But how do we gain this knowledge about Jesus’ life and death and resurrection? Sure, we could just read about all these things in the Bible, but the Bible isn’t always easy to understand, is it? Sometimes you need to have someone explain things to you. That’s why we come together in Sunday School and morning worship – not just for the fellowship we enjoy, and not even just to worship the God of our salvation, but also for the understanding that we share. We come to hear the story of Jesus again and again, so we might understand it more fully, more correctly.

So, if you’ve heard the story, if you have believed that it is true, if you have trusted in Christ because of what He has said and done, and if, as a result of your trust in Him, you have confessed Him as Savior and bowed the knee to Him as Lord, well, then why not try to help others along the same journey? Why not try to help other people hear the story too? Sure, we can do that as we support the work of our church planters and missionaries. But we can do the same thing ourselves, as we have gospel conversations with our friends and neighbors.

We can share the story with those who have already come to an understanding of their brokenness, like the Samaritan woman at the well. We can help people like the Ethiopian eunuch to understand more fully how Jesus fulfills all those Old Testament prophecies and rituals and ceremonies. We can explain to self-satisfied skeptics like the men of Athens that Jesus really is God, and that He is coming again to judge the world. We can assure the legalists and the ceremonialists that Jesus is the only way anyone can be saved, and that there is nothing anyone needs to add to His perfect work. We can share the story of Jesus with those who have never heard it, as well as with those who, because of the difficult circumstances of their lives, need to hear it again.

So this week, let’s not satisfy ourselves with just setting a good, Christian example for others. Let’s not simply resolve to hear the story of Jesus more often, or even just to help others tell His story. Since faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God, let’s speak that Word, having gospel conversations whenever we can. For it is only the Word of Christ that can bring anyone everlasting life.