



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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December 3, 2006

1st Sunday in Advent

Ephesians 1:15-23

Missionary Dan Sargent

First Lesson: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 25

Second Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Gospel: Luke 21:25-36

Jesus Keeps His Church Going

My wife, Lisa, and I went to Zambia in November of 1988. When we arrived in the country, there was one thing that struck me right away; something that was so different from what I was used to back here at home—all of the buildings in town and all of the structures, the permanent structures in the village were made out of burnt brick and cement block using mortar and concrete. The roofs of the buildings were made out of asbestos sheeting and metal roofing sheets. I was surprised that there were no buildings made out of wood like we have here back home in Wisconsin. It didn't take me very long to realize just why mortar and brick and cement and concrete were the building supplies of choice because in Zambia and many parts of Southern Africa there are different species of termite, and they love to eat the wood. In short order they would destroy any house that was made of wood if it did not have a treatment, an expensive treatment. Therefore concrete, brick and mortar are the building blocks of choice in Zambia.

Just recently in Zambia, on the main street in the capital city of Lusaka, a big poster was put up on the side of the road. This poster had a Zambian man pictured in the poster. It was a big billboard and the Zambian man had on his head a construction helmet. This man wasn't wearing a shirt and you could see from the picture that he was a body builder. His muscles were rippling. In his hands he was holding a packet of cement, a 100-pound bag of cement. On the poster, right next to the man's picture, was one word; one word written in the local language. The word is "MPHAMVU." That word translated into English means "power." Mphamvu = power. The cement company was trying to reach out to everyone in Zambia who wanted to build a building and was saying, "Use our cement because our cement has power"—mphamvu.

Our text for today uses the word "power." St. Paul in our text for today uses the word "power"—mphamvu—when he talks about Christ's church. With the help of our text for today, I would like for us to see how Christ Jesus keeps his church going and growing. He does this through his own power, as we say in Zambia, "mphamvu," and he does this through his own people.

Our text for today is Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. Paul was writing to this church and he knew the members well because he had served as their pastor for over three years. He writes to them in verse 15 and says, "*For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers*" (Ephesians 1:15,16). What was the reason that Paul was giving thanks? Paul knew about their faith. He

knew exactly how they had received this gift of faith in Jesus Christ. Just before the words of our text, in verse 13, Paul says, *“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation”* (Ephesians 1:13)—the gospel message—the power to bring people to know Jesus.

Now Paul knew that the church in Ephesus was going to face a difficult situation in the near future. It is recorded for us in the Book of Acts. Luke writes and tells us about Paul’s departure from the church in Ephesus. When Paul left the church, he said to the elders, to the teachers of that congregation, *“Be on your guard. Watch out. Trouble is coming. False teachers are going to come and they are going to take away your flock”*—problems in the church. The problem for the church in Ephesus?—false teachers.

One of the biggest problems that our church in Zambia faces is witchcraft. Perhaps here in the United States right now, one of the biggest problems that our churches face is what we call “materialism.” What do all of these things have in common?—the false teachers that were going to take away the flock, witchcraft and materialism. All three of them have their basis in one thing—sin. All three of them—our sinful nature, the world that we live in, and the devil who tempts us—bring the problems into the church.

Paul knew about this. Paul wanted to prepare his listeners. What did he do? He said a prayer. The words of our text—*“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms”* (Ephesians 1:17-20)—the power to believe.

Where does this power come from? It is found in Jesus Christ himself—Jesus, the power, the Word. The church in Ephesus knew this well and Paul talked about it when he went on to say, *“you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession”* (Ephesians 1:13, 14).

The church in Zambia has its motto printed on a church banner. This motto is taken from 1 Corinthians 1. It is written in the local language and the motto is this: *“we preach Christ crucified”* (1 Corinthians 1:23). The church in Zambia, Christ’s church, our church here in the United States—we preach Christ crucified—the preacher of both law and gospel, bringing the message convicting those people of their sin, the sin that we all carry inside of us. *The wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23) the Bible says to us, *but the gift of God is eternal life* (Romans 6:23).

We preach Christ crucified and by preaching Christ crucified Christ himself, Jesus, makes his church go and makes his church grow. 1 Corinthians 1:23—*we preach Christ crucified*—what does that mean that Christ, who had no sin, became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God (see 2 Corinthians 5:21)?

The problems of the church—one of the biggest problems in Zambia right now is witchcraft and over the course of 18 years when I served as a Zambian Bush missionary pastor I have seen many concerns regarding witchcraft. One of the things that I have learned over the course of time is that the parents will take medicine from the witch doctor and this medicine is put in the form of a charm. This medicine then is wrapped around the neck of the child and they feel and think that this medicine—this charm—prepared by the witch doctor will protect the child from harm. Many times when the parents would bring their children to the front of church for baptism, I was faced with a very difficult situation because during the worship service, suddenly there were the parents and the child together with the charm around the child's neck. I often would comment how over the course of time I would carry with me my Swiss army knife so that I would be prepared for that very situation. But I just didn't take the knife and cut the charm off and remove it and put it in my pocket. No, I took the time to preach Christ crucified and to preach law to those people bringing their child for baptism to remind them what the Second Commandment says and to remind them what it means to be under the power of the devil and controlled by witchcraft even if it took hours to go through that teaching. Then I would take the knife and I would open up the knife and I would give the opportunity to the father of the child and say, "Now what do you think must be done." They would take the knife and cut the charm off and give me the charm. The power of Christ and his Word—that power makes his church go and grow.

It's been 18 years now since I have been serving in Zambia. I have seen many changes in the church but perhaps the one thing that I have noticed more than anything else is the fact that over the last three years I have received very few of these charms from the members of our church. A pastor that I work with in our church, Pastor Soko, he took over control of one of the churches I was working with. He is now serving as their full-time pastor. Pastor Soko said to me, "Pastor Sargent, I am pleasantly surprised to see that the parents who bring their children for baptism no longer are the children wearing the charms"—the power of God's Word to change the hearts and minds of people. That power makes the church go and grow. What about us here?

The power—I am reminded of the poster in Zambia; the poster of this man holding the bag of cement. In Zambia the cement is put into packets. It doesn't come in a truck. The contractor needs to take the packets of cement and mix them together with sand and stone and it has to be mixed in the correct way. If the packets of cement are not mixed with the proper amount of sand for mortar or the proper amount of sand and stone for concrete, the result will not be good. The strength, the power will not be there.

God speaks to us today in our text when Paul says to us, *"I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come"* (Ephesians 1:18-21). That power is found in his Word and that power is Jesus Christ himself—the Word made flesh, the Word that came to dwell among us, the Word that

we will be celebrating this Advent season remembering the baby Jesus. Now, how are we going to make use of that Word? Like the packets of cement, they need to be mixed properly. They need to be used properly. If not, the result is a weak foundation.

I am reminded this furlough of one of the things that I struggle with personally. My family holds a family devotion every evening. We try to make sure and hold that devotion using a devotional book going into the Word of God—the Word of God, the power that causes his church to grow and to go. But often I find myself busy with other appointments and meetings trying to get things done and I am reminded by my son of how important it is to stay in the Word and how important it is to go to the power—the power that causes us to grow and to go—the Word of God—when he says, “Dad, what about devotion? You forgot devotion. It’s my turn to read.” Or “Dad, it’s your turn to read”—to go and to grow.

Our great Savior God Jesus causes his church to grow through his own power and he gives all of us the wonderful opportunity to participate in this work. He causes his church to go and to grow through his own people. Our text goes on to say, *“And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way”* (Ephesians 1:22,23)—the opportunity to serve in his church.

In Zambia this past year we had six Zambian pastors graduate from our seminary. Those six pastors were given the opportunity to serve in our church. One of those pastors was given the opportunity to go and serve in the Northwest province of our congregations, far away from the capital city, far removed from many of our congregations. This area was started by our missionaries in Zambia back in 1956. The congregations in this area had been served by missionary pastors visiting them once every two months. The congregation members there worked hard to prepare themselves to call a Zambian pastor. Growing vegetables and growing crops in their fields and selling those crops, raising the funds that they needed to build a pastor’s house, and the day finally came after almost 50 years when the congregations in that area would receive their pastor. I had the opportunity and the privilege of being able to take that pastor and his family to his congregation. When I arrived at the congregation and the parsonage where the pastor was going to be staying, the joy in the people’s faces and the sound of their joy in the singing was something that I will never forget. As the women were singing songs and the choir was receiving their new pastor and as the men from the congregation were unloading the furniture from the vehicle and putting it in the house, I took the opportunity to go across the road to a place where there was a small shop. I bought myself a bottle of Coca Cola. In Zambia, Coca Cola can be found everywhere and it is bottled in a glass bottle. The bottle of Coca Cola needs to have an opener to open up the bottle of Coke. As I opened the Coke, it fizzed and bubbled and I enjoyed the bottle of Coke, and I watched the congregation as they received their new pastor. I thought about how Christ, through the power of his Word and by sending his Holy Spirit, had filled the members of this congregation in the same way as this bottle of Coca Cola was filled with fizz and overflowing with works of service and joy.

After they had received their pastor, I noticed how the congregation members didn’t go home. They stayed overnight for three days holding a camp meeting, worshipping,

studying God's Word and receiving their pastor and waiting for the Sunday service when the pastor was ordained and installed. *"And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way"* (Ephesians 1:22,23).

Dear friends, I see the banners here in your church building: "Together in Christ," "Building in Christ," "Growing in Christ." I've seen, walking through the basement, the expressions of service that members of the congregation have been giving to those who are in need—Together in Christ, Building in Christ—what a wonderful opportunity we have. Jesus gives us that opportunity when he fills us in every way, just like that bottle of Coca Cola.

But we need to take this warning. In Zambia, sometimes you will get a bottle of Coke and when you go to open that bottle of Coke, it is flat. The carbonation is gone. It is so easy to hear the Word and not put it into practice. Don't be that flat bottle of Coke. Don't be filled with doubt but instead be filled with the joy that comes from knowing that together we are building Christ's church, for Christ himself makes the church go and grow. He does this through his own power, the power of the gospel, the mphamvu, and he does this through his own people—you, me and our church in Zambia.