

Welcome

A couple of years ago, I was in Indianapolis for a conference for our denomination, when I was stopped by a street preacher. You've seen the type - often with a bullhorn or a stack of tracts in their hands, shouting bible verses at passers-by, often warning of God's coming judgment.

This guy took one look at me, decided there was no way I was a Christian, he shouted to me: "You need Jesus in your life!"

I wanted to be nice - after all, this was a fellow Christian, and honestly I was on my way to a seminar. So I waved at him and said, "Thanks! I'm a pastor."

His eyes bugged out a little and he said, "Really?"

Yes, really.

He got excited and leaned in and gestured around us. "So what do you think?"

I didn't understand. "About what?"

"The End Times."

Now listen - I was trying to avoid an argument. But I can't resist when someone wants to talk about the End Times. Revelation is one of my favorite books in the bible and people love to read it wrong. So long story short, I got into a little bit of a discussion with this street preacher. It might have gotten a little loud, much to the amusement of the other pastors with me, and it may or may not have ended with that street preacher calling me the Antichrist.

Which, if I'm being honest, probably wasn't the best way to witness to me. I mean, if I *was* the Antichrist, that probably wasn't a good way to get me to 'come to Jesus', right?

I want to talk about Evangelism today - how we tell people about Jesus. Pretty much no matter who you are, whether you're a church person or haven't been to church in a long time, evangelism freaks you out. Maybe like me you've been on the receiving end of a street preacher type. Or maybe you've sat through evangelism trainings in your church where you were presented with a formula for how to "share the Gospel" with people. I've sat through a few of those, and they always felt disingenuous or confrontational to me.

I want to flip Evangelism on its head today. We can share Jesus without fear, and without being jerks. We can do this because God has gone ahead of us. There's not a single person we meet who does not already have God in their lives - whether they realize it or not. And that's good news because it allows us to recenter Evangelism on relationships, not information.

Message

Today is Epiphany, the end of the Christmas feast. The day of Epiphany marks the day the magi arrived in Bethlehem and visited Jesus as a child. And it's the beginning of a season in the Church year where we reflect on what it means that Jesus came not just for the Jewish people, but for the whole world.

Appropriately, then, our Epiphany series this year is called Good News for a Change. We're going to talk about how to talk about Jesus... with anyone. The \$20 word for this is Evangelism, and it's a word with enough baggage to make just about anyone break out in a nervous sweat. Whether you've been preached at or sat through those classes on how to preach at people, Evangelism conjures to mind that combative, confrontational, in-your-face kind of approach.

And even beyond that, how many of us have been in a space where religion came up and we felt really inadequate to participate? People asked a hard question about Jesus, Church or the Bible and we just kept our heads down because we weren't sure what to say.

Throughout this series, we're going to explore a lot of the ways we get Evangelism wrong, and why it's a lot more fun than we would've imagined. But to begin today, let's start with *what the thing is*.

The word "evangelism" comes from a Greek word, *euangelion*. The best translation of that word is "Good News". The Bible uses it because it's a word the Roman Caesars used anytime something happened that reinforced Roman rule. So when they won a major battle against enemies, or when one of the Caesars had a son, they sent out *evangelists*, "good newsmen" who would announce this all over the Empire. They were basically saying, "Good news! Because of X new thing, Rome's rule is secure and will continue forever!"

So when the first Christians started telling the story of Jesus, they had to decide what to call it: a story? A biography? A report? And they chose the word "euangelion". So Mark begins his Gospel with "This is the euangelion of Jesus Christ, the son of God."

Mark said, all this stuff I'm going to tell you about Jesus is good news! But not, of course Rome's good news. A different kind of good news. A good news that says the whole world belongs to God, not Caesar.

[Quote from Matt's book, page 3 - the Gospel is all about Jesus!] "Any 'gospel presentation' is, by definition, only shorthand for the 'full gospel.' There's no such thing as a complete gospel presentation, because Jesus is an eternal person, and all the news about him is good." -- Matt Mikalatos, *Good News for a Change*

So if the Good News is eternal, how are we supposed to boil it down to something shareable? Well there's a reason Christians throughout history have selected one particular verse as a great headline for the Good News. John 3:16 says, "This is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him." -- John 3:16-17

Why did God send Jesus into the world? Because God *loves* the world. Jesus didn't come to judge the world; Jesus came to save us. We've been talking about this for a while here at Catalyst, but it bears repeating here: the heart of faith is relationship. God's mission in Jesus is to restore a relationship with us. The heart of Evangelism is that through Jesus we can be in relationship with the one who created us and loves us.

This is my big problem with those street preachers and a lot of the Evangelism training I've been subjected to - not that it's all about God's judgment (though there's plenty of that). But that it's not *relational*. That street preacher in Indianapolis was concerned about what I believed about certain doctrinal issues. And while, as a theology nerd, I love discussing that stuff, it's not about *salvation*. It's not about God's relationship with me.

If our Evangelism is going to be good news, it has to be centered on relationships - with God and with each other.

[Scripture Slide] Which brings us to those three kings. Turn with me to Matthew 2. The so-called Three Wise Men are among the most misunderstood characters in the Bible. In our songs, we call them "three kings" and in most of our nativity sets, they're dressed as royalty. Church tradition has even assigned them names, and if you visit the cathedral in Cologne, Germany, you can visit their alleged tombs.

But when we read Matthew's story here in a moment, you'll notice a few curious things. First, there aren't three of them - they give three gifts, but the actual number of them is unknown. And they're not kings - Matthew uses the word "magi", which is where we get our word 'magician'. In the first century, this word almost certainly referred to priests of Zoroastrianism, the official religion of the Parthian empire.

That doesn't mean anything to us, but to an ancient reader, that would've triggered some anxiety. Israel in the time Jesus was born was the borderland between two massive empires - Rome to the West and Parthia to the East. Both of them fought for more than a century for control of Israel - being right on the coast of the Mediterranean, it had huge strategic value. Rome had always been able to maintain control of Israel, but Parthia tried over and over to wrest control of Israel away from Rome.

Oh and one last thing before we dive into this text: Zoroastrian priests practiced astrology (most ancient religions except for Judaism did).

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him." -- Matthew 2:1-2

An ancient reader would've seen this for exactly what it was: pagan astrologers representing a foreign government came to make an alliance with a new dynasty. They come to Jerusalem because where else would you expect a new king to be born?

There's so much more to this story - how Herod tries to trick them, how they find Jesus and worship him, how they escape Herod's traps, how the holy family flees to Egypt. But I want to stop today just in those first couple of verses.

These pagan priests announce to Herod that "we saw his star as it rose." Ancient astrologers believed that when a powerful new king was born, it was announced in the very skies themselves. And this time, at least, it happened to be right on.

Let me be plain: God used astrology to bring these pagan priests to worship Jesus, the newborn Messiah.

This is... outside the box evangelism. I've been through a lot of evangelism trainings, read a lot of evangelism books, and you want to guess how many of them suggest using horoscopes as your go-to evangelism tool?

Zero.

No one suggest that. And yet astrology is exactly how these magi find themselves in an encounter with Jesus.

Now, don't worry. I'm not about to suggest we start using astrology as a primary evangelism tool. The Bible's quite clear elsewhere that as God's people, we don't need to trust in the stars to tell us anything about ourselves or our future. God knows us and keeps us.

What I want us to see in this story of Epiphany is that God was already at work in the lives of the magi. While they were still in Parthia (modern day Iran), God was drawing them into relationship, inviting them in ways they already knew to come closer to the God they didn't know.

This is the first truth of Evangelism: God is already at work. We're not doing something brand new. We're following God. We're not taking God to someone who doesn't have God. God is already present in their lives, at work. Now, it's possible, even probable they don't *realize God is at work*. But that's a different sort of beast.

In other words, our job is to introduce people to the God who is already present with them, not to tell them some facts about someone far off and distant.

When I meet people and they ask me about my wife, I have to tell them facts about her - that she's a social worker, that she plays roller derby, that she's one of the kindest, warmest and most hospitable

persons on the planet, that she's crafty and funny and has a fierce streak especially when it comes to facing injustice. That's all really good information.

But when Amanda is *with* me, I don't have to do any of that. I just have to make the introduction and they get to know her in ways my list of facts and feelings could never convey.

During the next couple of months, we're going to explore various encounters with Jesus and ask what they have to teach us about how we share his Good News with people in our lives. And it's all, always, going to point back to this: relationship has to be at the core of it, always. Because relationship is the heart of faith. Friendship is the heart of Jesus' good news.

God is already at work everywhere in the world, with every person. God spoke through the stars to invite pagan astrologers to life-changing encounter with Jesus. Which means that God is working in the lives of everyone you meet. We're not telling people about Jesus as a distant, abstract concept. We're inviting them into a relationship with a person who is already present with them, at work in their lives!

Communion + Examen

Jesus demonstrates his love for us.

1. Where has God surprised me in the last week?
2. When in the last week might I have ignored God?
3. How can I look for God in the next week?
4. Who is God inviting me to be Good News to in this season?

Assignment + Blessing

Get together with a Christian friend and practice sharing the Good News with them!