

Matthew 28:18-20.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Go Together

Like everything else in 2020, this year's mission fest is a little different. There is no guest speaker today, but today we will take some time to talk about the work that is going on as we walk together as a synod - or a group of congregations in fellowship supporting and encouraging one another in our mission of sharing the gospel. As I look out at the world today, I wonder how God might use all of the ideas and the adjustments to ministry that are taking place due to the global pandemic. It has been interesting to hear stories of how people are adjusting to the current circumstances, and while there is certainly frustration with the disruption of ministry norms, unexpected blessings are coming forth as well. Our congregations have experienced some of this unexpected blessing amid this season of change and adjustment as we have been blessed with a number of extra and unexpected viewers to our online streaming services - to God be the glory. As I share a little bit with you about our mission festival subject today it is similarly interesting to see how God's hand brought about the planting of a church on the island nation of St. Lucia. It is interesting, but I suppose it is not that surprising, as we see in our gospel lesson for today that it is God's good and gracious will that his Word goes out into the world and to people of all nations.

In the early 1960', long before the internet and streaming church services posted on websites, a man named Donovan living on the Caribbean island of Antigua was able to tune in regularly to the radio program, "The Lutheran Hour". Through listening to this radio ministry and reading through Lutheran books that he obtained he proclaimed himself trained in Lutheran doctrine and began to share the gospel to others on the island. Several families, on this island of Antigua, were drawn to this Lutheran teaching and after Donovan passed away in the late 1970's they then gravitated to a WELS Lutheran mission that would be established on that island. Two of these families were the Suris and the Flemings. Both had come to Antigua from India hoping to serve in the United States as doctors, but they had settled on making this island nation there home instead. The Suris and the Flemings were both charter members of the WELS mission of St. John's Lutheran Church in Antigua and a few years later would head over to St. Lucia to serve as doctors there. They also had in mind to bring their faith with them and see if they could start another WELS mission on this neighboring island. With the help of a few WELS teachers at the Lutheran school in Antigua, they were able to convince the mission board in the WELS South Atlantic District to work toward establishing a mission congregation on St. Lucia too. From there the church slowly began to put down roots. Served at first by pastors from Antigua, it was decided that they would be better served by a pastor of their own. The Lord blessed the ministry there, and in December of 1991, Trinity Lutheran Church, in Castries, St. Lucia, was established. By the

summer of 1992, Trinity was blessed with a full-time missionary of their own and God blessed the sharing of his word there. By the mid-1990s, the church had become established enough that a program was dreamed up by our synod preparatory schools that would annually send high school students down to St. Lucia to assist with outreach activities such as Vacation Bible School. God blessed the work and the workers, as they shared the good news of Jesus these future pastors, teachers, and staff ministers got a welcome taste of the ministry. The congregation and the community were also blessed as the word of God was shared. Meanwhile, regular services continued to be held in a rented office area but not without the caring touch of the gifts that God had given to this church. Such gifts included handcrafted chancel furniture and music and song that gladly filled the space and reflected the sounds of the region. Membership at Trinity continued to grow, and the church was strengthened through the years so that two pastors, including native son, Pastor Bramdeo Ramgolam, have served the congregation for more than a decade. Within the last ten years, a building project brought about the partial construction of a new church. The current structure as it stands is already a great blessing as it is being used for a preschool, youth group activities including a soccer camp, and small group Bible studies as well as worship on Sunday morning. Though the power of the gospel membership had grown to a reported 160 souls and they hope to continue to grow the church and their expansion plans. God has brought his blessings as God's people carry out the great commission to go and make disciples, baptizing in the name of the Triune God, and teaching them the Word that Jesus has given to his Church. And I suppose you could trace this back to the fact that a man listened to the radio and heard God's Word proclaimed.

Keep this in mind and pray that God may bless the work that we do as a congregation and the work that we do together as a synod to share the good news about Jesus. Remember that the work being done in missions near and far, in the Caribbean and the United States, and throughout the world is also the result of the work that we do together. Your support of missions through the WELS helps reach out with the saving message of the gospel both near and far.

This work, of course, is not without challenges, and the lack of travel and tourism this year has brought pressure and disruption and stress to a ministry on an island that is known for the motto of, "No problem". So where do we turn when there are problems, when there is disruption to mission work and life in general, due to sin and sickness and trouble? Where do we go when there is this great big challenge of sharing God's Word with a world lost and stumbling through the wreckage of sin? Together we can go to God's Word and be blessed by the good news of Jesus. Built right into his commission to, go out and share the gospel, our Lord Jesus gives us words of powerful encouragement and blessing.

Before the word "go" is even given, Jesus reminds his disciples that he has the authority and power over all things. ***All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, therefore go!*** This is our comfort and strength, motivation, and reassurance, as we go about this vital work. The Savior who gave his life in love and raised it up again in power now has been given the authority to watch over all nations and peoples. He will protect and bless his own as he sends them out into the world. These are words of incredible comfort especially right now when the world seems in such disarray. Consider how Christians have been threatened and some displaced because of the anti-Christian climate in certain countries. Consider how certain mission hotspots have suddenly been limited in their efforts

to share the gospel. Consider how many congregations are still not able to assemble in person. Consider how difficult it is for us here to adjust to these sudden changes and now wrap your mind around how a congregation that is not yet established in its community or established financially now suddenly faces a whole slew of challenges that it did not anticipate. St. Lucia is an island nation whose economy benefits greatly from tourism. What happens when travel restrictions are introduced globally, and many individuals now think twice about their plans to travel. And this has been going on for the last nine months and might stretch out for more than a year. That change is difficult. Pray for Trinity Lutheran in St. Lucia as they face difficulties and challenges that are so unexpected. Pray for mission churches and established congregations that God may help them adapt during this strange and challenging time. That's a lot to consider and that's a lot to pray about, but as you pray remember those words of Jesus! All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me! The God of the universe stands with us and goes with us as we head out together to share the good news that is for all nations.

He gives his Word of reassurance and instruction and promise to us today just as he gave that same word to his disciples who stood before him on the day of his Ascension! What a world of change the disciples were facing. Many of those disciples were of Jewish descent and only knew that little part of the world. But compelled by the message of the gospel and their Savior's call they would leave their villages and homes in Israel and head out into Samaria and throughout the world. They would go out to a world dominated by Greek thinking, and pagan culture, and a pantheon of gods and different beliefs and they would take the message of a God who humbled himself and gave himself over to death for those who did not deserve such favor. Christianity was different. Christianity was so new that it wasn't even called Christianity yet! Surely people would oppose and question and reject them, but they were sent out by Jesus Christ who had authority over all things. And they were armed with the teachings of the Holy Scripture, fulfilled, and made more certain through Christ, our Lord. Christ would go with them as they shared the good news of sins forgiven. That God had become one of us so that we might live with him now and forever would bless that spread of that message then and he will bless it now. For this gospel of Jesus Christ is a message that brings the peace that all human beings need. Born slaves to sin, scattered and separated from God because of stubborn rebellion, God would send out his saving message to the world so that sinners lost in sin would be gathered back into the loving arms of the Father through Jesus the Son. Gathered together, washed, and cleansed, sinners are made new and reconciled to God through the good news of Jesus. This is the message that we are sent to proclaim, to give, as Christ pours out his blessings, quite literally through Baptism which he gives to us as well. Water connected with the promises of God and by God's grace, it grants new life, forgiveness, faith, and the gift of everlasting life. Lost and condemned creatures made children of God through water and the Word. Poor miserable sinners made heirs of the riches of heaven through faith in Jesus, and that faith is created through the proclamation of God's Word. Go, fellow children of God, and share this message of sweet salvation!

This is what Christ calls us to do. This is the work that he has called us to be a part of. And even if we don't go out to different nations ourselves, we go together as we serve as the body of Christ. We can pray for and support missionaries in far-flung countries and places nearby. Through the support of our local congregations and our synod, we go together

saved and blessed by God. For with his word of encouragement and with his Word of instruction he sends his disciples to share these saving means of grace to every place, every nation, and every neighbor. ***Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*** Our Lord and Savior graciously sends us out his disciples with words of encouragement, with words of instruction, and with a word of promise. ***And surely I will be with you always to the very end of the age.***

Things are a bit challenging and frustrating even in the current circumstances that we find ourselves in around here. And so how exactly can we share the message at a time like this? How do you go out with the gospel when it appears that barriers popping up on every side? Notice, how beautifully simply our Savior's instructions are. He does not give instructions that would only work in one particular place or one particular time or setting. He simply says, *Go! Make disciples! Baptize! Teach! And I will be with you!*

Things will always be challenging as we live a world that is broken by sin and tossed about by fear and death, but God is with us. Jesus has been given all authority and heaven and earth and he reminds us of this as he gives us this wonderful encouragement and this vital task. So blessed by him and equipped with Word and Sacrament, may the Lord help us to simply go, and quite often go together.

With the encouragement of our God and the encouragement that comes from hearing about the work being done to share the gospel near and far, let us consider how we might share the unchanging message of the gospel with our community and an ever-changing world. Let us trust in God, tell of Jesus, and be patient. With God's help, we will continue to do the things that we are able to do. As a church we can still make plans, and with God's help, and with the intelligence that he has given us, we will adjust and go about this blessed work as we are able. Maybe you can simply encourage people to view online. Don't underestimate that as a tool of outreach, invite them to watch, inquire and follow up, and then when the time is right see if your friends will follow your lead and come back to church. Maybe you can simply share this sermon with others after you are done reading it. Think of others in your life, share the word personally, speak to your neighbors and friends and family and share the word with your inner circle. Parents invest more time in sharing the gospel with your children in a variety of ways. Think of your home as your own personal mission field. Read, study, sing, learn and love the Word, as we praise and serve the God who has saved us.

Things are a little bit different for us as congregations in 2020 but consider how our congregations have weathered the storm of the last 7 or 8 months rather well. That's not the case for every congregation. Pray for missions as they try to establish themselves and keep their footing in the community. Continue to support the work of the synod as we go out with the gospel together. There are challenges and opportunities that abound all over the globe, learn more about them, pray for the mission work that is going in places like St. Lucia, and all over the world. And above all know that Jesus is with us always to the very end of the age. He has given us his powerful saving Word. In this great commission that he has given to his church, he has blessed us with a word of encouragement, a word of blessed instruction, and a word of promise. May God bless all nations through his saving message of Jesus Christ, our Lord, and Savior. Amen.