

Do you want to hear something astounding?

I read a report in the New York Times and it's something I think every Christian should be made aware of. I found it in an editorial, not in the religion section, but right in the middle of their editorial page.

One of their traveling columnists, Nicholas Kristof wrote this:

"So with Easter approaching, here I am in the heart of Christendom.
That's right, Africa.

"One of the most important trends reshaping the world
is the decline of Christianity in Europe and its rise in Africa and other parts of the
developing world, including Asia and Latin America.

I stopped at a village last Sunday morning here in Zimbabwe – and found not a single
person to interview, because everyone had hiked off to a church a dozen miles away..."

Now here's the astounding part:

"On Easter Sunday more Anglicans will attend worship in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa,
Tanzania, and Uganda --- EACH ---
than Anglicans and Episcopalians together will attend services in Britain, Canada, and
the United States combined."

"More Roman Catholics will celebrate Easter in the Philippines
than in any European country. The single largest congregation in the world is in South
Korea. And more Christians will probably attend Easter services in China
than in all of Europe put together."

Keep in mind, the guy who wrote this isn't a member of the Billy Graham Association. He's a
secular New Yorker. But listen to the impact these non-Western Christians were having on him.

Later in the same column he writes,

"Whether in China or Africa, the commitment of new converts is extraordinary. While I
was interviewing villagers along the Zambezi River last Sunday, I met a young man who
was setting out for his Pentecostal church at 8:30 a.m.

'The service doesn't begin until 2 p.m.' he explained;
but the journey is a five-hour hike each way."

"If on a Sunday you want to attend a lively, jammed full, fervent and life-changing service of
Christian worship, you want to be in Nairobi, not Stockholm Sweden." ¹

And here's Kristof's conclusion:

"So where faith is easy, it is fading. Where it's a challenge, it thrives." ²

Now add this to the picture. Walking long distances to church is not the only challenge facing Christians in other parts of the world.

Just ten years ago, on July 6th, 300 officers of China's Public Security Bureau, disrupted Christians at worship in the village of Hengpeng and demolished their building. A week later, police raided a house church in another Chinese city while Christians were meeting at 4 a.m. for Sunday prayer and worship.

Both were churches founded by Watchman Nee, a Chinese man who died for his faith in a Chinese labor camp in 1973. ³

Why do I share this with you this morning? Both our 1st and 2nd Readings this morning also speak of a time when Christian faith was far from easy.

In Acts, chapter 7 we hear the story of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Fearless in his testimony to the love of Christ, Stephen was surrounded by a mob, dragged out of the city, and stoned to death.

And in our 2nd Reading, Peter is writing to the churches in Asia Minor, who were facing persecution of their own.

The Roman emperor of that time had begun a harsh crackdown on all who professed their faith in Christ. And so Peter addresses their fears and he begins his letter with some wonderful words of hope to these suffering Christians.

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
In his mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
and into an inheritance that can never spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you,
who through faith are shielded by God's power
until the coming salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time."

And then listen to this:

Peter knew that these were people who had been beaten down. He knew that the Romans were trying to intimidate them, bully them, and steal from them the one thing that mattered most: their identity as beloved children of God.

And so Peter declares to them, in chapter 2, verse 9,

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people; but now you are God’s people.
Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Another way to translate that would be to say,
“Once you were nothing. You were nobody.”

Most of the Lutherans in India, almost 80% of them, were literally nobodies , until they met Christ. You see, 80% of these Lutherans in India are Dalits. Under the Hindu caste system, these Dalits, were labeled “untouchables.”

They were shunned in Indian society, barred from advancing beyond their station, given the worst and most menial jobs, and discriminated against as if they were non-persons.

When the big Tsunami hit India several years ago, even though the caste system has been officially banned, most of the Dalits were not allowed to share the relief materials like food, shelter, and medicine.

But through the churches in India, and through Lutheran World Relief supplies were brought in and given to the Dalit communities. Shelters were built and other forms of emergency relief were delivered.

Through their identity in Christ these Dalit brothers and sisters are hearing the Gospel in Peter’s words,

“Once you were not a people; but now you are God’s people.”

A pastor here in California, who felt God calling him to serve overseas, and was preparing to leave for the mission field in South America.

But before he left, the youth group he had been working with, wanted to tell the congregation about the difference he had made in their lives.

At a special service, each young person stood before the congregation and started out by each saying their first name,

“Hi, I’m Joe.” Or “I’m Teresa.”

And then right after their name they each said, “I am a beloved child of God.” They stood tall, smiled, looked directly at the congregation, and spoke from their hearts.

One by one they defined who they were as children of God, and that their purpose was to reflect Jesus to the world. They had worked through all the labels that people had tried to pin on them, like, “loser... failure... stupid ... victim... or worse.”

They had come to see these labels as lies. Instead of letting the world or Satan define them they had come to see themselves through God’s eyes.

“Once they were nobodies, but now they were God’s chosen sons and daughters.”

In his book, *Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen says,

“Each one of us, are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children, or friends loved or wounded us. That’s the truth of our lives.”

There is always hope in Christ, even in the most difficult circumstances, even when life brings us suffering.

That’s the message that God wants us to hear this morning.

We are deeply loved, and there is hope in all circumstances.

So don’t be discouraged.

Pray for those who are persecuted because of Christ.

Let their lives and their witness inspire us.

And always, always remember, “You are beloved in Christ Jesus.” That’s who you are. Amen

¹ Quote by Mark Noll

² “Where Faith Thrives” by Nicholas Kristof, NY Times, March 26, 2005

³ Christianity Today, “Crushing House Churches” January 2004 p. 63.

<http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/2004/january/24.63.html>

⁴ “Dalits Fight Tsunami Daily” by Udit Raj, (Jan. 13, 2005)