

October 5, 2008

## “The Joy of Christ”

Today’s sermon may be what you call a sobering message. With a title like “the Joy of Christ,” that may be hard to imagine. But let me share a thought-provoking story to set the stage. This is a story I heard and shared with our youth group. It went something like this.

Bob had a dream, a dream that began when he was in third grade. It was during fire prevention week and the firefighters had come to his school. Bob was mesmerized as the fire truck rolled through the parking lot with lights flashing and sirens screaming. It came to a stop just short of a large metal pan that was filled with a burning fluid. The fire fighters jumped off the truck, pulled the hoses and quickly knocked the flames down. At that moment Bob knew, he would be a fire fighter.

In grade school he was a fire cadet. High school saw him entering the fire fighting ROP classes. He went to college and got a degree in fire science while also getting his certification as an EMT. Upon graduation, he applied to his hometown fire department, the Philadelphia Fire Department. He was accepted into the Philadelphia Fire Fighters Academy. He spent the next twelve months training, studying, training, interning and training some more. Finally, he got his badge and was assigned to firehouse number ten in the old town region. He was unbelievably excited.

On his first day, the first call was for a dumpster fire, then a car accident, a stroke victim, another car accident, and then a house fire. As the truck raced to the scene, he was excited, but also wondered, what would they find? As they drew closer, they saw the smoke billowing up from the neighborhood. When they turned on to the street, he was horrified to see that a row house was almost completely involved. Fire was pouring out of the downstairs windows and smoke billowed from the second floor windows. As they pulled up, the Captain began barking orders. Tim, run a line to the hydrant! John, pull a one and a half inch line over to the neighbors house, don’t let it spread! Sam, get the pumps up and running! Bob, get a ladder and get those people out! Bob froze as he looked to the second floor.

A mother clutched her newborn baby, her husband was holding his two and four year old girls close to him and Bob sat there frozen with fear. The other fire fighters turned to look when they heard the screams. The roof began to fall in. The mom jumped and the flames enveloped the father and children. All perished.

At his trial, Bob plead, "Not Guilty. His lawyer stated that Bob just couldn't do any thing; he was too scared and worried that he to could be hurt or die. At that point, I asked the youth, if you were the judge, what would you say? It was interesting to hear our youth. Immediately, they said, Guilty. Another said, life in prison without parole, to which they all agreed to it. One of them kind of summed it up pretty well, he said that "he was trained to do this, it's not like he didn't know." I thanked them for their honesty. The youth wanted to know, did it really happen? I told them I didn't know if the story was totally accurate, but then I said something that made everyone very quiet. I said, "I think the story is about each one of you. It's your biographies. You were the fire fighter." After a little bit, one said, "how?" To which I replied, it might not be a house, but there is a fire and it's worse than the house fire because it's eternal. It's called hell.

I know there are many people who don't believe in it. They will say, "My god is a god of love, he couldn't condemn people to hell." Let me make something perfectly clear, when someone says that, he's breaking the second commandment. He has made a graven image of his god in his own mind and that's what that individual is worshipping. The god of his mind. The Bible is clear, in fact, Jesus himself is very clear; at the end of the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:22; he says, "Anyone who says, 'you fool' will be in danger of the fire of hell." Again in Matthew 5:29 & 18:19, Jesus says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to loose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." In Matthew 5, verse 30 Jesus repeats the same thing, but this time in regards to your hand. Matthew 10, verse 28, Jesus warns "be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell." In 23:15, Jesus warns the Pharisees of making someone "a son of hell." And in 23:33 Jesus asks them,(the Pharisees that is) "how will you escape being condemned to hell?" It's also in Luke 16, 19 through verse 31 that Jesus tells the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. They both died. Lazarus goes to heaven, the Rich Man to hell, "where he is in torment."

The Old and New Testament are in agreement. Exodus 34, verse 7 says that God, “does not leave the guilty unpunished.” James 2, verse 10 says that, “Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” Romans 3, verse 23 says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” If your thinking to your self and your saying, “I’m a pretty good person.” You might want to look at Psalm 143, verse 26 and Romans 3, verse 10; which tell us that “there is no one who is good or righteous.” In fact Romans 6, verse 23 sums it all up and it tells us our reward. “The wages of sin is death.” I told you at the beginning, this was going to be a sobering sermon. But... Sometimes we like to hear that word because it erases everything that’s been said. Romans 6:23 continues; “the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This is where our Gospel comes in. Why, did Jesus come? In his own words, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.” How did he save us? Listen to our New Testament reading from Hebrews 12, verse 2. “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” “Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross.” What was the joy that was set before Jesus? What brought Him such joy that He endured the cross? What is this joy? The answer is very simple, Our Salvation. That’s what brings Jesus joy. When someone is saved through Him. This is why Paul says, “there is salvation in no one else.” And also, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” That’s Romans 10, verse 13. Yet right after 10, verse 13; Paul raises some questions. He says, “How then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.” As a church, we need to be those beautiful feet. We need to bring the good news to those who are destined for eternal destruction. Our church really needs to be a fire department. This is why we are pursuing a youth group, why we are pursuing a college group, why we are putting all this work into a childcare center and upgrading our bathrooms so that they are friendly to young families with children. Very simply, if you look in America, the vast majority of young people and young families just don’t know they are sinners, and that there’s a punishment for sin and that they need to fall at the foot of the cross.

But it has to go beyond just the corporate church; it has to go beyond just Zion Reformed Church. Each and every Christian, each and every person here at church needs to look at themselves in a mirror and ask, “Am I a Christian?” “Am I Christ like?” “Am I willing to take the risk of failure or ridicule and bring the words of salvation to someone else?” We need to ask ourselves, “Is this what brings us joy?” We need to look in the mirror and ask, “Am I an eternal Fire Fighter?”

In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.