

If I were to place a map of the world in front of you and ask you to point to the ends of the earth, where on the map would you point? We know that the earth is actually round, but we still use that phrase to describe faraway places. Where are the ends of the earth?

I'll tell you what it looks like from where I stand. I grew up on the west coast of the United States. From my bedroom in the house where I grew up, I couldn't literally see the Pacific Ocean, but I could see a body of water that connected to the Pacific Ocean. Nowadays I live a little further away from that ocean coast, but it's not that far. I have also lived part of my life in the middle of the United States. I have visited the east coast a few times. I have been to Europe a few times. I even got to travel to the Near East part of Asia once. The further east I've travelled, the more different the world is from where I grew up. I've never been to the Far East of Asia. From my perspective, that would be the ends of the earth. It is quite literally the opposite end of the map from where I stand. You might have a different perspective, though. To you, where are the ends of the earth?

There is one place that we could say is absolutely not the end of the earth. That would be the city of Jerusalem. It was just outside Jerusalem where Jesus told his disciples, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." So Jerusalem was the middle, the epicenter of the earthquake from which Jesus' witnesses would go out into the world.

That is why, about 15 years later, St. Paul and St. Barnabas were in a city called Antioch, as we heard in today's Second Lesson from Acts chapter 13. If you're still looking at the map that I placed in front of you, this Antioch is near the middle of the country we call Turkey. To get there, Paul and Barnabas had taken a boat across the Mediterranean Sea, then hiked over 100 miles through the mountains. It might have seemed like they had finally reached the ends of the earth. But not really. In fact, there was a Roman colony in that city. There were even enough Jewish people that it had a synagogue. Many Gentile believers gathered at the synagogue to hear God's Word, too.

On the Sabbath day, Paul and Barnabas went to the synagogue. Since they were travelling teachers, they were invited to speak to the congregation. Paul stood up and began to proclaim good news that none of these people had ever heard. The listeners knew their Old Testament, but they had never heard of Jesus. So he took them through Old Testament history and prophecies and showed them that Jesus was the culmination and the fulfillment of it all. Jesus was crucified, died, was buried, and rose again, just as God had promised.

Paul explained exactly what Jesus' death and resurrection meant to the people in Antioch. Through this gospel, the forgiveness of sins was theirs! Through faith in Jesus, they were justified, that is, declared to be not guilty of all they had done wrong. They were all familiar with the Old Testament law that God had given through Moses. That law could never justify them, but Jesus could and Jesus had. Paul announced this good news. But he also warned them not to reject this message, because they needed it.

Paul's words are an important warning to you and me and the people of our day, because there are so many people who are trying to justify themselves by keeping the law. Think of some of the religions from the ends of the earth. Over 45 percent of the people in the world adhere to Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism. There is no forgiveness or justification in these religions, because they require people to save themselves by doing the right things. Yet people can never do enough, because even when we are on our best behavior, we're still sinners. These people need the good news of Jesus' forgiveness.

But you don't have to go to the ends of the earth to find people who are trying to save themselves by keeping the law. There are plenty of religious groups in our own region that say you will be rewarded if you do good things. Then there are non-religious groups who teach exactly the same thing. Yet the Bible tells us that we are supposed to be perfect. These people need the good news that Jesus was perfect for them.

Of course, you don't have to look around at other people and churches. Even in our own hearts and minds we sometimes think that we are pretty good people, that we've been following God's law, that we need to do a little better, and we can justify ourselves. But we can't. We're guilty of all sorts of wrongdoing. We need the good news that Jesus has lived and died in our place, because without faith in Jesus we will never be forgiven.

Paul's words are a very important promise to you and me and the people of our day. Jesus has been perfect for you. Jesus has paid for your sins. He has sent his Word to the ends of the earth so that you would hear and believe, because he wants you to be in heaven. Through faith in him, you are not guilty of any wrongdoing, and your sins are forgiven.

Many of the people in the synagogue of Antioch wanted to hear more of this good news and begged Paul and Barnabas to return the following Sabbath day to teach them more. But these people couldn't wait a whole week. They followed them and kept listening to them. And the following Saturday the synagogue was packed with people who wanted to hear what Paul had to teach.

Unfortunately, it seems that those who were in charge at the synagogue were not so happy about Paul's popularity. They saw that he was getting more attention than they were. Paul had brought good news for them, but they rejected it, because their influence over the people was more important to them than forgiveness of sins and justification before God.

In spite of the abusive things they said about Paul and Barnabas, many Jews and Gentiles came to faith through the gospel they spoke. This, too, God had promised in the Old Testament. Paul quoted the prophecy where God the Father told God the Son that he would bring salvation to the ends of the earth. Jesus was bringing that salvation through Paul to those people. And all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Sadly, some people still reject the gospel message in our time. Sometimes this makes us feel discouraged that the church is shrinking and nervous about spreading the gospel. It is so easy for us to see the rejection and hatred that come against Jesus' church and miss the fact that the church is actually growing very rapidly in many places of the world. No matter what it looks like, Jesus' salvation truly is going to the ends of the earth.

It is happening all over the world, and you and I get to be part of that growth, because of the work of our national church body, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Here's an example: More than a decade ago, our Wisconsin Synod had a traveling seminary, which trained church workers in Latin America. But when the recession hit our country, we had to cut back that program drastically. So how would we train church workers? Our missionaries started a website and Facebook page called Academia Christo, where Hispanic people can learn what the Bible teaches no matter where they are. More than one million people have connected to the Facebook page. Four thousand people have requested enrollment in classes. These people are learning from every Central and South American country. Our missionaries are using this tool to identify future church workers. These are people with whom we would never have come into contact any other way.

Our Wisconsin Synod has operated another mission field for even longer. Next Sunday our brothers and sisters on the Apache Reservations in Arizona will celebrate 125 years of mission work there.

This milestone is an amazing blessing from the Lord. But these Christians are not satisfied with celebrating this milestone for themselves. They want to bring salvation to Native Americans across the United States, because most people who live on reservations do not know about Jesus. After they saw the success of Academia Christo, they launched their own website, [nativechristians.org](http://nativechristians.org). Their goal is to use the internet to reach many beyond the boundaries of their own reservation. If we had time, I could tell you several more stories about ways that God is working through our Wisconsin Synod churches, other ways that we are working together to bring his forgiveness to many people.

Stories like these help us to see why the mission offerings that we collect each Sunday are so important. The money that you collect does not go to buying your pastor a private jet like some pastors you see in the news. We gather offerings from the money that the Lord has given to each of us to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

We think of places that are far away from here when we talk about the ends of the earth. I'm sure you realize, though, that where you and I live is part of what Jesus was talking about when he sent his disciples to be his witnesses at the ends of the earth. Jesus has people to whom he wants to bring his salvation right here where we live. You and I can bring that good news to the people we know.

Some of you have done this before. You've told people that Jesus is their Savior. You've invited them to church. Some of you haven't done it yet, because you've never thought about it or had the right opportunity. Some of you think that you could never do it, because you don't think that the people you know would come or you don't think that you are the right person to speak this invitation to others.

If you are afraid that the people you know would never come to church, let me tell you about the man who preached the sermon in the synagogue of Antioch. We call him St. Paul, but he wasn't always a saint. In fact, before he became a Christian, he made it his life's mission to throw Christians in prison and have them killed. Would you ever think that he would accept an invitation to church? Of course not! But the gospel of Jesus changed his life! And if it could change his life, then it can change the life of any person that you know. And if you are afraid that you are not the right person to tell other people the good news of Jesus, then let me remind you that Paul didn't just start going to church after he became a Christian. He became God's chosen instrument to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. And if Jesus could use a man like Paul to do that, then Jesus wants to bring the gospel to people through you.

We have an opportunity coming to do just that. Christmas is coming. There are now only 9 weeks until Christmas Eve. Many of the people you know who don't go to church are open to receiving an invitation to church from you, and they are even more open to coming on Christmas Eve. Even before you invite them, a lot of them are already thinking about going to church that day.

In your service folder, you'll see that there are some blank lines. This is a place for you to write the names of some people whom you could invite to church on Christmas Eve. Take a moment to think of some people. Write down their names. Take this service folder home with you. Write down a couple more. Put this piece of paper somewhere where you will see it often: on your fridge, on the counter in your bathroom, or maybe on your nightstand. When you see that paper, pray for the people whose names you have written down. Ask God to give you an opportunity to tell them what Jesus has done for them. And invite them to come to church on Christmas Eve. If you want something to hand them with information about the service, that will be available soon. The words you speak do not need to be eloquent. The Lord will bless you as you speak from your heart: "I would like you to come to church with me this Christmas Eve. I want you to know who Jesus is and what he has done for you. Jesus is the most important person in my life, and he is the most important person for you to know and trust. Will you please come with me?"

Jesus has placed you and me right here at this time and place, because he has people here who have been appointed for eternal life. There are people we know who will come to believe in him. He has given us our congregations and our fellow Christians and our national church body so that we can work together to grow in his truth and proclaim his forgiveness. His church is growing rapidly and strong. Jesus is at work through us to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.