

Preparing To Harvest

*Sow for yourselves righteousness;
reap steadfast love;
break up your fallow ground;
for it is time to seek the Lord,
that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.
(Hosea 10:12. NRSV)*

*³Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.
⁹And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'
(Mark 4:3-9. NRSV)*

*¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you.
And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last
(John 15:16. NRSV)*

Message 7

White Unto Harvest
May 23rd, 2010
John 4:31-38
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

This morning you are going to see that we have saved the best for last. Open your Bibles to John 4:31-38. This is the last message in our Preparing To Harvest series and I can't wait to get it out because it is so timely and so determined of the Lord. Let me provide the context for you; Jesus had decided to go through Samaria on his way back to his base in Galilee. He didn't need to do this, and his disciples would have preferred that he hadn't, but he DETERMINED to do it. The Samaritans, as I'm sure you've heard before, were a sort of Jewish mongrel outcast. They were the half breed children of the Northern Israelites who had been mostly wiped out by God due to their idolatry and assimilation into Canaanite culture. The faithful among them had fled south and assimilated into Judah in advance of the judgement of the Lord, but those that remained and survived destruction and exile gradually merged into the surrounding peoples and became known as Samaritans. They were hated by most Jews and they were thought of as wildly unsavoury

characters who were best avoided altogether. Just the sort of people you can imagine Jesus being very interested in converting, amen? So he goes to this place and decides that he needs to stop there for lunch. He sits down by the town well and the disciples scramble off to buy food. With them out of the way Jesus begins to engage the local citizenry in evangelistic chat. A woman comes by to gather water and Jesus begins to talk to her. He speaks the Word to her, prophesies over her and then sends her out to gather a crowd of people to come and here he gives the Gospel. She runs off and begins to spread the word and the disciples come back with lunch. Let's pick up the story at verse 31:

In the meantime His disciples urged Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But He said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." Therefore the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought Him *anything* to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work. Do you not say, 'There are still four months and *then* comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this the saying is true: 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you have not laboured; others have laboured, and you have entered into their labours." (John 4:31-38. NKJV)

Positioned To Harvest

I want to use this fantastic story to talk to you about the people who are positioned to harvest because that is what this whole series has been leading to. We were appointed for this very thing, Jesus said:

I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last (John 15:15. NRSV)

We were made for this very thing, so I don't want to miss it. A great harvest is coming, even now the latter rains are beginning to fall upon the faithful. So who are those who are positioned and prepared to participate in the last great harvest of God? Using this story as a guide we see that harvesters will always be people with:

i. A PASSION for the kingdom cause.

I love the picture of Jesus in verses 32-34. The disciples come back with their take out bags and juice boxes and they want to set up a meal for the Rabbi, which is really nice and admirable, and they paid for this meal out of their own pockets as was required of disciples and here is Jesus and he seems totally distracted and disinterested. "We brought you a nice lunch, Rabbi, would you

like some chicken nuggets?” “I have food to eat you know nothing about”. That’s almost a bit mean. “We brought NUGGETS man! What could be more important than NUGGETS?” And Jesus says:

“My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to **finish His work.**” (John 4:34. NKJV)

“I am obsessed with the work of my Father and I can’t think of anything else right now. We will have to microwave your nuggets later. Sit down and don’t distract me.” He’s focused. Listen to me friends, food and drink are fine and your father knows you need them. You need houses and heat and clothes and transportation but THESE THINGS ARE NOT LIFE! Saved men and women, who understand the meaning of the word ETERNITY do not live for such things. Pagans, who believe that we live today and die tomorrow and there is no eternity, there is no future, there is no meaning, PAGANS LIVE FOR SUCH THINGS. The Apostle Paul, talking about pagans said that too:

Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. (Philippians 3:19. NRSV)

But followers of Jesus are not supposed to be focused on those things. Jesus taught that again and again:

“Therefore I tell you, **do not worry about your life,** what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹**Therefore do not worry,** saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” ³²For **it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things;** and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³**But strive first for the kingdom of God** and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:25-33. NRSV)

The people who are going to be used by God in the coming harvest are going to be those who EAT, DRINK and SLEEP harvesting. God is not going to use part time labour for this job, only the full time, only the RADICALS will get the call. I’m not talking about people who are in “full time vocational ministry” – I know lots of professional pastors who are asleep at the switch, I’m talking about people who are sold out focused on the kingdom of God. People who don’t just

pray “Thy kingdom come, Lord, thy will be done” – they live it! They struggle to think about anything else.

Do you know that feeling? Sometimes I struggle to focus on regular things, so consumed am I with the kingdom. I come home and I have to force myself to get into regular things, stories about groceries, tasks like cutting the grass, talking to regular people about the weather, or the mail or whatever people talk about. I have to force myself not to grab people and shout: “Why are we talking about this? Who cares whether it will rain or shine or snow or hail drops of blood. None of it matters anyway because you are going to HELL!!!!” Of course that would make it very hard to be friends with your neighbours, but do you know what I’m saying? I’m not saying we should quit our jobs so that we can harass the neighbours fill time. Don’t hear that. There is nothing wrong with honest work my friends, and most of the great evangelists have been honest workers who lived the Gospel where God put them and brought in the harvest from where people live. D.L. Moody was a shoe salesman, Finney was a lawyer, the Apostle Paul was a tentmaker; most of the best evangelists had jobs. Real harvesters go to work, they just struggle to keep their mouths closed.

We went on vacation with Cris and Christine Vollick a few weeks ago and I saw this principle in action. Christine sometimes struggles to keep her mouth closed, in a good way, for Jesus. We had to sit through a time share speal and it was supposed to last 90 minutes but 10 minutes in the salesman made a critical mistake: he took a breath. And Christine jumped in and began witnessing to him. “Are you a Catholic?” “Uh, yes, but not a very good one. I believe in God but I think the church is corrupt.” “That’s fine,” Christine said, “because going to church doesn’t make you a Christian anymore that being in an oven makes you a muffin. You have to have saving faith in Jesus Christ which results in things like going to church, but that doesn’t save you. And also, you shouldn’t go to a Catholic church because they are all stuffy and traditional and you should go to a church that teaches the Bible. Do you own a Bible....” and on and on it went. Finally I had to say: “Ok, Christine, that’s enough. Let the poor guy finish his talk.” Harvesters are on harvest mode all the time and they struggle to turn it off. We laugh about that, but think about it my friends, what else really matters? There will be no time shares in hell so maybe we all ought to be a little more eager to talk about things that matter.

I'm not saying that you need to become annoying or negligent at work, work is holy and work well done is often our permission to speak, but I am saying that God is looking for people who seek first the matters of the kingdom and who leave obsessing over food, drink, shelter and stuff to the pagans.

I want to speak candidly to you about this. If you were to line up 100 evangelical Christians today my guess is that half of them wouldn't even be truly saved. Half of them would say they are saved but to them that means simply that they believe that Jesus died on the cross and rose again to save us from our sins, but even the demons believe that. That isn't saving faith, that is basic theological awareness. About half of the evangelicals I know show absolutely no evidence of fruit. They are just as grouchy, gossipy or addicted today as they were 5 years ago. There is no growth. No fruit = no faith the Bible says. About 25 of those evangelicals would fall into the category of "saved by the skin of their teeth". The Bible talks about them:

¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—¹³the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. ¹⁴If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If the work is burned, the builder will suffer loss; **the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.** (1 Corinthians 3:12-15. NRSV)

Paul says that if anyone builds on the true foundation of the Gospel – they are adding some form of proving works to their legitimately saving faith, they will do so with either perishable things like wood or straw or imperishable things like silver and gold, the truth will be revealed by fire. He is saying that the fire of death and judgement will reveal whether what you did after you got saved had any eternal value. Some people are going to get saved, well and truly, but everything they work at after that is of only earthly value, it will not pass over into the next life. They will still be saved, but they will be like a man escaping a fire. He runs out naked saving only his own life.

I think there are going to be a lot of naked North American evangelicals in heaven my friends. We are so obsessed with our jobs and our food and our homes and our stuff that no one has time to serve in the kingdom workforce anymore. No one can serve in the nursery, no one can lead a small group, no one can serve in Jr. High because we are all so busy with our wood and our straw. None of it goes with us. When the game is over, it all goes back in the box.

It's that last 25 that God is looking for right now. Those who struggle to keep their mouths shut because every conversation seems like an invitation to witness. Every meeting seems like a divine appointment. His eye is on you and there are great days ahead.

ii. An understanding of the seasons.

The people who are greatly used in the coming harvest will also be people with an understanding of the seasons. Jesus said to the disciples so concerned with their juice box and nuggets:

Do you not say, 'There are still four months and *then* comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! (John 4:35. NKJV)

He is saying that in all walks of life we are understand that there are seasons and there are natural rhythms and that basic awareness of those seasons prepares us to seize the important moments. In Palestine there were about four months between the close of the sowing and plough season and the start of the harvesting season. You knew the harvest was getting close when the heads of grain began to turn white. Likewise in the spiritual realm, we ought to be able to recognise the signs that a great season of harvesting is just around the corner. It is a mark of spiritual men that they know the times, it is a mark of ignorant men who believe that things will continue as they always have. The Bible says this in 2 Peter 3:

³First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts
⁴and saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, **all things continue as they were from the beginning** of creation!' (2 Peter 3:3-4. NRSV)

Fools say that as it was so it will always be. Righteous men know that God makes history and intervenes to establish his purpose and because he is merciful, he provides warning and he displays signs. Jesus says that like a woman in labour, certain signs would begin to appear in greater frequency as an indication to the watchful that the end was near:

⁷For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: ⁸all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs. (Matthew 24:7-8. NRSV)

Conflict, famine and natural disasters will come with greater and great frequency, like birth pangs, alerting the watchful to the approach of the end. A few weeks ago on the CNN website there was a running series of articles and video posts related to the question CNN was asking: "Are natural disasters becoming much more frequent?" They had experts come on to discuss

earthquake frequency. The conclusion of the discussion was very interesting. The experts acknowledged that we do not have enough historical data to say for sure whether what we are seeing is an increase in earthquake frequency or whether this is a short term fluctuation, but what is absolutely certain is that over the last 10 years we have seen a very unusually high number of strong earthquakes under human population centres. That is unprecedented. In the past, most of the severe earthquakes happened out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean where no one lived, now it seemed like they were being positioned for maximum damage. Interesting. We are seeing an increase in the frequency of birth pangs in the physical realm. We are also seeing it in the social realm. World economics is getting more unstable day by day. Fluctuations in world stock markets of more than 1% in a day used to be very uncommon, now they happen every day. Why? Because the debt fuelled mirage of the modern economy has no foundation and is very susceptible to fear. Fear is one of the ways God influences human history. All throughout Deuteronomy God reminds the Israelites that they will conquer the land, not because they are stronger and mightier than the pagans who hold it, but because God will go before them and throw their enemies into panic:

²⁵This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under heaven; when they hear report of you, they will tremble and be in anguish because of you.' (Deuteronomy 2:25. NRSV)

When God wants to turn history on its ear he injects irrational fear into the hearts of fallen men. The world economy has never been more vulnerable to fear than it is today. Spiritual men and women see this and begin to prepare for a season of harvest because spiritual men and women ALSO remember that God uses poverty and famine to humble hearts and reveal faith:

²Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. ³**He humbled you by letting you hunger**, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, **in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone**, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:2-3. NRSV)

Spiritual men and women, who know how to read the signs, when they see the resources of men poised to fail, they sharpen up on their evangelism skills because they know that when God wants to harvest, he makes men hunger. Hungry men are humble men and God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Know the times.

iii. A belief in aggressive fertility.

The people that God uses in this coming harvest will be people who cherish a belief in seasons of aggressive fertility. Jesus says something that doesn't make a ton of sense to us:

And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. (John 4:36. NKJV)

This is an allusion back to Amos 9:13. The prophet Amos prophesied to the great great grandparents, spiritually and physically speaking of the very people Jesus was about to harvest and he said:

¹³The time is surely coming, says the Lord,
when the one who ploughs shall overtake the one who reaps,
and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed (NRSV)

That is a picture of a time of AGGRESSIVE FRUITFULNESS when seeds are sprouting up so quick that the guy treading the grapes will be hard on the heels of the guy sowing the seeds! The time between the seed hitting the ground and the wine passing your lips will be half a heartbeat! Jesus is saying to the disciples: "The fishing may never be better than it is going to be today! Put a worm on it boys, because these fish are biting!"

In the work of the kingdom there are seasons of extreme fertility and you don't want to miss one. This is the same in economics, this isn't rocket science. In economics they talk about the "S-curve" of profitability. With any new product there is a brief season of insane profitability. Take the automobile for example. The automobile was invented around 1900. For the first 20 years cars were so expensive to make that only the super rich could afford them. From 1900 – 1920 the market saturation for automobiles went from 0% to 9%. In 1900 0% of people had cars, 20 years later, about 9% of households had a car. You can't make a lot of money during two decades of slow growth like that. But around 1920 Henry Ford invented the assembly line and figured out how to make cars much cheaper through mass production and now from 1920 – 1929 the market saturation for cars went from 9% - 90% - that's when you can make some serious money. If you bought stock in Ford or GM in 1917 by 1929 you could have bought your own continent. That was a decade of insane profitability. But then once 90% of households own an automobile, your opportunity for profit takes a nose dive – hence the great depression of the 1930's. It took the automobile another 70 years in North America to increase its market share by 7%, there is not a

lot of money to made in that season. That's the S-curve in economics. Economists know that there are brief windows of opportunity to make ridiculous amounts of money off of a piece of technology. There are seasons of aggressive profitability and then there are long seasons where not much of anything is happening. So it is with economics, so it is with fishing and so it is in the kingdom of God.

There was an extreme burst of fertility in the church from A.D. 60 – A.D. 250. The market saturation of the Gospel went from about .001% of the known world to 60% of the known world in less than 200 years. Then things went quiet for a long time. Then there were seasonal bursts of awakenings and revivals: the Protestant Reformation, the first and second Great Awakenings, the Pentecostal Revival of the early 20th century and now the season of harvest before us. The vast majority of harvesting is done in these few brief moments of history. Don't miss it. Now is the time to put all your cash in the market – the FISH MARKET, now is not a good time to put all your cash in the stock market, now is the time to go all into the FISH MARKET because we are about to enter a season of aggressive fertility.

iv. An inheritance of well managed soil.

The last thing I want you to see is that the people who will be used of God in the coming harvest will be people who inherit some well managed soil. Jesus says that here in John 4:

For in this the saying is true: 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you have not laboured; others have laboured, and you have entered into their labours. (John 4:37-38. NKJV)

Jesus says to his disciples: "We are going to harvest today, but do not forget the work that was done long ago by people who received little thanks and little praise. We reap today what other faithful men and women sowed." Scholars can't help but wonder who exactly Jesus is talking about here. Some suggest that perhaps John the Baptist had done a Samaritan tour and prepared the people for the message of Jesus and maybe that's true but it seems more likely that he is talking about the great old prophets who ministered in the northern kingdom to a people who wouldn't listen and who eventually suffered death and destruction. The great great grandparents of the people Jesus was about to gather in. Prophets like Amos and Hosea spoke in those places

and they planted the seeds that lay long in the soil awaiting just such a season. So it is in every generation of harvest.

Harvesters always stand on the shoulders of men and women who did great and important things for God but never got to taste the fruit of their labours. The harvest we have just begun to gather in is nothing compared to what God has coming. I truly believe that this fall we are going to begin to harvest in ways that will make the last two years look like nothing. But when that happens we must not forget that we are reaping what other great men and women have sown in silence. This church has been uniquely favoured of God for reasons you and I struggle to understand. But part of that reason, not all of it surely, God is mysterious, and I am not suggesting that we have figured out his ways, but part of the reason God has chosen this church is because of the work done by others who never saw this day. I think of men like Pastor Baird and Pastor Ledrew who taught this church to hunger after the word of God. I think of a man like Pastor Russel Hughes who taught this church what it was to pray. I think of a man like Neville Cowan who taught this church how to give up its addiction to conflict and strife. None of those men saw the kind of harvest we are seeing now but they did the hard work didn't they? They and all those who laboured with them; you would know better than me the stories of those people. If Pastor Neville had not broken our distracting addiction to conflict, if Pastor Norm and Pastor Ledrew had not instilled a hunger for the Word and if Pastor Hughes had not taught us to pray **THIS DAY WOULD HAVE PASSED US BY**. But they laboured. And now we will reap. Let us never forget the grace of God and the labours of faithful men and women that have brought us to this place.

Conclusion:

This is an exciting time in the church, in our church, and you don't want to sleep through it, believe you me. The fish are biting and you need to find a seat in the boat or you'll get left on the dock. This is not a good time to be too busy, this is not a good time to be anchored down with sin and addiction, this is not a good time to be disqualified. This is a good time to be engaged. I want to challenge every one of you to find a good spot for harvesting. Let me recommend a few to you. I recommend Children's Ministry. Liz tells me that she needs 3-4 more volunteers to deal with the recent influx of new people. Statistics tell us that about 80% of conversions happen before the age of 18 so Children's Ministry is a good place to be sitting when this season comes

upon us. Youth Ministry is just as good. I think Matt is looking for some Jr. High helpers. Family Circle is always a productive place. Mile 1 is a hot spot and Susan is looking for mentors and Small Group leaders for that program. The Orillia Life Centre is a fantastic spot! This summer we are going to begin orientation for people who want to move over and make that their home base. The fish are jumping right into the boat down there and you could be a part of that. There are other places too where you could get a space. Don't be left on the sidelines because the early bird gets the worm, catches the fish, stomps the grape or whatever metaphor you prefer. Let's not be naked on the last day church. Let's hear the words: "Well done thou good and faithful servant. Enter now into the joy of your father." And all God's people said, amen.