

# I Am with You Always!

Genesis 12:1-4, Matthew 28:11-20

April 29, 2001

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” Here is the goal of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Here is the target toward which everything has aimed. Here is the purpose for which the gospel according to Matthew was written. By this Great Commission, Christ gives us faith, hope, assurance, courage, and a tremendous job to do.

The basis of this commission is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. “The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them....And Jesus came...” Did you hear that? He had been crucified, dead, and buried, but now, “Jesus came” to the mountain. “Jesus came” and spoke to the disciples. “Jesus came” though all the powers of death and hell tried to prevent him from doing so. “Jesus came” back, forever beyond crucifixion, forever beyond pain and suffering, forever beyond death and burial. Without this, none of the rest of the gospel would be remembered. But with this, with the resurrection, God put his stamp of approval on everything Jesus stands for, raised him from the dead, and gave him a new and different life, the same person but forever beyond the reach of death!

If we never had anything to do with death, these verses would not mean much to us. If none of the people we love ever encountered death, these verses would not mean much to us. But every one of us is going to die, and every one we love either has died or is going to die, so the resurrection of Jesus Christ means everything to us! It means that death has been defeated. It means that death does not have the last word. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the promise of our own, so that we have good hope for eternal life. Otherwise, apart from the resurrection, it would appear that death has the last word about us, the final say so, the ultimate authority over who we are. But because of the resurrection, we know that death does not have the last word about us. God has both the first and the last word about us. Death may have the next to the last word, but God has plans for us which even death cannot destroy.

As a part of the resurrection, Jesus was given all authority in heaven and on earth. This includes authority over good and evil, over the past, present, and future, and especially over life and death. Death has been defeated. Our old enemy, which tries to snatch us away from God’s purposes of fellowship with God and with each other, has been done in! Though death is given power over us, we have the assurance of a life beyond death. This deprives death of its greatest weapon, our fear of death. Thus, we are set free to live now, even in the face of death.

On the basis of his resurrection, and in exercise of his authority, Jesus gives us a tremendous job: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” It is not enough to say that these words were spoken to the first disciples. It is not enough to say that they have launched missions around the world. These words are spoken to us, to you and me, today. With them, we are given a new identity as Christ’s disciples. We are given new hope and courage and reason to live. And yes, we are given a tremendous job. That is why it is called the Great Commission. There is an urgency about this. This job takes priority

over other concerns. Jesus does not ask us if we want to do it. Jesus does not ask us if we like the idea. Jesus does not ask us for our permission. We have been called and gathered together by the Son of God, the Lord of the universe, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given. He has given us this job. We can do no other.

The Great Commission ends with a promise: “I am with you always, to the close of the age.” How can this be? We never met Jesus during his earthly life. We never saw Jesus during his resurrection appearances. And yet, Jesus is with us, in the reality of spirit and word. He reconciles and restores us to God. His gospel is the message of that reconciliation, the good news which not only tells us about, but actually conveys to us, that very restoration. Jesus calls us together as his very own. He takes us from different families, backgrounds, nationalities, and races, and names us his disciples, and so we are. Despite what the world tells us, we do not belong to ourselves; we belong to God. We do not belong to the powers of death or evil; we belong to our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. This is our life. This is our identity. This is our good hope. This is who we are.

I first memorized these verses as a child, probably in Communicants’ Class. I preached a sermon on them in a class at Union Seminary twenty-five years ago this month. Twelve years ago I preached my first sermon as pastor of Gilwood Presbyterian Church on these verses. Four years ago I preached my first sermon as pastor of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church on these verses. Over the years, I have preached on these verses in five different states, and today is the twentieth time I have preached on them. The Great Commission has gotten down into my bones, It has formed me very deeply. It is part of who I am. And it is part of who we are as the church of Jesus Christ.

So, what are some of the ways that we at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, as individuals and as a church, can obey and fulfill the Great Commission of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, to make disciples?

One way we can obey the Great Commission is by worshiping God Almighty! We have to be disciples before we can make disciples! As it says in today’s reading, when the disciples saw Jesus they worshiped him for the first time. Some of them doubted. Our faith and worship do not have to be perfect, either. The authority of Jesus Christ does not depend upon the perfection of our faith and worship. He goes right ahead with his commissioning, even of doubting disciples, which means there is room in here for us. Whatever faith they receive and worship they offer—whatever faith we receive and worship we offer—are dependent upon the prior authority of Christ. The most important and faithful thing we can do as Christians is to worship God together every Sunday, reading, preaching, and hearing the gospel, singing hymns of praise, praying our prayers, giving our offerings.

Within this context of worship, it is our privilege today to have baptized three infants. We baptize people in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in direct obedience to these very words of Jesus. This verse is the reason we have a baptismal font in this church, the reason we baptize people, and the reason that discipleship begins in baptism. In baptism, God claims us by name as God’s very own, and so we are, forever. In baptism, God washes away and forgives our sin. From the waters of baptism, we are raised to new life with Jesus Christ. The water that we see is a sign of the Holy Spirit which we do not see, the Holy Spirit which gives us life, breath, faith, hope, love, and courage. We baptize the world one person at a time.

A second way we can obey the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, in addition to worship, is by mission. While worship stands at the heart of the church's life, mission carries that life into the world. Mission is one way we "go" into all the world. This includes our ministries of compassion here and abroad. Many of us have been involved this year in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, welcoming the stranger, and visiting the sick. We participate in the Stuart Circle Parish meals ministry, CARITAS night shelter, Freedom House, Habitat for Humanity, and on and on.

A third way we can obey the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, in addition to worship and mission, is by evangelism. This means speaking a good word for Jesus Christ, inviting people to church, presenting the good news, and urging people to commit their lives to Jesus Christ. This is at least part, if not all, of what Jesus means by making disciples. "All nations" includes this nation, this state, this city, and these neighborhoods. It includes neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies, those close to us and those estranged from us. Of course, we cannot wait for our own discipleship to be complete or perfect before we invite others to join us, or we would remain forever silent. Instead, we invite people to join us as we go along the way.

Within the context of worship and evangelism, one of the greatest privileges and responsibilities we have before us is the radio ministry of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. This was started in 1924, just after radio was invented, and we believe that these broadcasts of our Sunday morning worship services for the last 77 years make up the longest running Christian radio program. While worship attendance here numbers several hundred, our radio audience numbers several thousand! We are grateful for the opportunity and the privilege of proclaiming and sharing the gospel in this way, and we are grateful for all who join us by way of radio, worshiping, believing, and praying with us.

A fourth way that we can obey the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, in addition to worship, mission, and evangelism, is by Christian education! Surely this is part, if not all, of what Jesus means by making disciples of all nations, "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." What we do here in worship, in Sunday School, in Vacation Bible School, in the Presbyterian Women's circles, and in other classes and settings is in obedience to Jesus Christ. I urge us all to participate, all as students, some as teachers.

We live in strange and difficult times for the church and for the world. There is great confusion about the nature and content of the Christian faith. Some, even in the larger church, have asked, "What is the big deal about Jesus?" In the face of such questions, this congregation affirms again that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, the one to whom "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given." Some, even in the larger church, have suggested that the scriptures are time and culture bound, limited by the knowledge of those who wrote them, so that their teachings, such as those about chastity in singleness and fidelity in marriage, are no longer authoritative or binding on people today. In the face of such arrogance, this congregation affirms again that Jesus Christ commissions the church to a life of teaching all nations to observe all that he has commanded us, so that scripture is the authority over us, not us over it, and so that we are called to lives of obedience and morality. In these strange and difficult times, part of our making disciples, part of our teaching, part of our ministry as this congregation, will be to stand up for the historic faith of the Christian church, to name the name of Jesus Christ, to submit ourselves to the authority of scripture (which will include learning and absorbing it), to seek the holiness in our lives to which God calls us, and to do all of this not only as a witness to the world but also and especially as a witness to the larger church. This is our commission. We can do no other.

So far today we have talked about only the last paragraph of the gospel according to Matthew. Our reading included the next to the last paragraph, also. The stories in these two paragraphs are parallel but opposite: While the soldiers went to the city, the disciples go to the mountain; the soldiers reported to the priests, the disciples report to Jesus; the priests had to gather the elders and take counsel, Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and on earth; the priests gave the soldiers a bribe to tell a lie, that Jesus was still dead, that his body was stolen, and that death is final (and it must have been a big bribe, for soldiers to say that they fell asleep on guard duty and could not keep a dead man in a tomb); Jesus commissioned his disciples to tell the truth, and so to make more disciples; the priests promised to keep the soldiers safe, Jesus promised to be with the disciples, and so with us, always, to the close of the age; the soldiers took the money and did as they were told, and the disciples...well, it does not say! Did they obey Jesus and fulfill the commission, or not? Well, of course they did; if they had not, we would not have the gospel, and we would not be here today. So, what is going on with this abrupt ending? The parallel has been broken here, and the story has been left unfinished in Matthew, because the only way this gospel can be finished is in the hearts and lives of those who hear it. Will you and I believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Will you and I obey and fulfill the Great Commission? Will you and I do as we are told? The question raised by this ending that is not an ending is not about what the first disciples did, but about us. What is Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church going to do? What are you and I going to do? What are we going to do for Jesus Christ?

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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