

BOLDLY PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL



**Share Your Reasons
for Hope
as Missionary Disciples**

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Bishop of Madison*

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Introduction

In 1 Peter 3:15 we read: “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.”

This passage reminds us that each and every baptized believer must be ready, willing, and able to share with others the saving message of our Christian faith.

It is the task of every vocation in the Church—from those in Holy Orders to Consecrated Religious to the lay faithful—to boldly proclaim the Gospel. This mission is the fundamental purpose of the Body of Christ.

We can begin to do this by going back to the basics of our faith. Who is Jesus for us? How have we experienced Him? How do I grow in my relationship with the Lord? How do I better proclaim the love, mercy, and forgiveness that I have experienced flowing from His merciful heart?

In the initial efforts to launch our “Go Make Disciples” evangelizing initiative, the word *kerygma* comes up often.

Meaning “proclamation” in the original Greek, the *kerygma* is the essence of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ distilled to its shining essence.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Simon Peter stands up on Pentecost morning, addresses the assembled crowd, and proclaims that this Jesus, whom they crucified, God has made both Lord and Savior.

To simply affirm that Jesus is Lord is to assert the *kerygma*.

We do so every Sunday when we recite the Nicene Creed professing Jesus Christ as our one Lord:

the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through Him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation He came down from Heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, He suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

As we can see, Jesus relativizes all human power and orders it to the ultimate good of human salvation.

An “Elevator Speech”

Another way to understand the *kerygma* is the proverbial “elevator speech.”

If you had five minutes to witness your Catholic faith to someone, how would you express it?

Which components of the Scriptural narrative summarize God’s action of creation and salvation? Where do we fit into this divine plan? What should be our response?

Our Catholic elevator speech will be uniquely our own, as we share our personal experience of the love of Christ and the importance of our faith, but four central movements should be common to every proclamation of the *kerygma*.

They are: 1) The *creation of the world* as an act of sheer divine grace; 2) *Original Sin*, as man's fall from full relationship with God and the entrance of sin and death; 3) the *whole Christ event* as God's merciful response to humanity's predicament; and 4) our *active embrace of Catholic discipleship* as our response to the Lord's saving invitation.

In this booklet, I will reflect on each of these four essential parts of the *kerygma*. My hope is that you can memorize the key components and begin to personalize it.

In this way you will “be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” and boldly proclaim the Good News as a missionary disciple!

Kerygma and Creation

Philosophy, the study of wisdom, begins with wonder, expressed as a fundamental question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”

To make it more personal, have you not at some moment mulled over the astounding fact that you are here?

Why and to what purpose do I exist?

Through the convergence of thousands of factors, each of us has come to be. Our brief yet beautiful life on this planet is sheer grace.

When we ponder creation, we behold a world, indeed a cosmos, of such astoundingly intricate design, cyclic harmony, and extraordinary beauty, that our minds and hearts refuse to conclude that all of this wonder is just some sort of cosmic accident.

A providential, beneficent, and almighty power is at work here.

God did not have to create the world, the universe, or us.

Perfect in Himself, the Lord does not need us; our existence is not necessary to Him. Yet He did so. Why?

The only possible answer is sheer love. God wanted to create the universe in its spinning galaxies, mysterious planets, expansive oceans, and stalwart mountains with us human beings as the crown of that creation.

His love is so infinite and powerful that it overflows into the handiwork of creation.

The divine fingerprints are everywhere, if we have the vision to see.

The functional complexity of the human body, the simple beauty of a sunrise, the persevering cycle of the seasons, and the stunning diversity of plants and animals all point to a divine intelligence at work.

The poetic narration of the six days of creation in Genesis teaches us that God made everything out of nothing, that all which exists only does so as an act of His will, that God finds creation fundamentally good, that man and woman are created in the divine image, and that God rested on the seventh day.

Existence as a “Gift”

This first part of the *kerygma* is essential for us to understand the rest.

God made us in His image with a will, heart, soul, mind, and body, so that we can enter into relationship with Him, in the fullness of the Trinitarian life.

Our existence is a sheer gift, nothing deserved, willed, or planned by us.

We live, move, and breathe only because we participate in the very Being of God and without Him, we would fall into nothingness.

Our life then is not a random accident. We are not simply highly-evolved animals.

Our human nature is not plastic matter that we can manipulate at will. The world and other people do not exist simply to satisfy our selfish pleasure.

We are children of God, destined to live forever, here in this world for a very short time to fall in love with the Lord, discover the beauty of our existence in Christ, and to do the work that God has prepared for us from all eternity.

When we discover that everything is a gift from God's hands and heart and that our life only makes sense in relationship to the Lord, the rest of the *kerygma* narrative takes on greater purpose and meaning.

Our souls are precious to God, and He desires our happiness and salvation more than we do.

This journey of life is a pilgrimage to the Father's House, which means that human history in general and the particulars of our lives in detail are going somewhere, that creation is fraught with the grandeur of the divine, as God's love story unfolds down the pathways of this mysterious, beautiful, and grace-filled world.

Reflect

1. *What are some of the first ways you heard the message of the kerygma? How does hearing it in four succinct steps help to clarify the message for you?*
2. *Have you ever had a chance to share your kerygamic “elevator speech” with someone else? How did they respond?*
3. *What catches your attention in creation? Where do you experience “the divine footprints” in your life? What does it tell you about God? About yourself?*

Power of Sin and Death

The second part of the *kerygma* is the realization of our brokenness, an honest acknowledgment of the power of sin and death, both in our lives and the reality of the human race.

Those of us who are older may remember the old-fashioned parish missions, during which the preacher focused on the second part, offering up some fire and brimstone, seeking to convict people of their sinfulness, talking about the eternal pains of Hell, wanting to move the hearts of the parishioners towards repentance and conversion, encouraging the Sacrament of Confession.

Perhaps, in the old days, sin and hell fire received too much attention, but in today's culture of self-affirmation, the pendulum has certainly dramatically swung the other way, such that any focus on sin is dismissed as unhealthy fear-mongering; any exploration of guilt is a sign of psychological imbalance.

A quick view of global news sufficiently reminds us that we dwell in a fallen state, filled with violence, suffering, egoism, sickness, and death. In fact, the darkness of the world often hinders many people from believing in God. How many times have we heard, “If there is a loving God, how could He allow _____?” If Jesus truly has saved us, why is everything still so messed up?

Genesis reminds us that sin, suffering, and death were not part of God’s original plan, but enter in as the painful consequences of humanity’s fundamental turn against relationship with the Lord. The narrative of Adam and Eve and Original Sin speak of the goodness of creation, the beauty of God’s intention, the positive and negative aspects of divinely-bestowed freedom, the wounded nature of our human condition, and God’s refusal to give up on us.

When I ponder the sin, sadness, and suffering in my life, listen to the pain of other people’s sorrow, hear of the shootings, injustices, disasters, and hatred played out in the world every day, I come to know my/our radical need for a savior—someone who has the power and mercy to transform what is broken, sad,

wounded, and dead within us, so that we can know life, love, joy, forgiveness, and peace.

If I never think about what I need to be saved *from*, I will never know the glory of what I have been saved *for*. As Saint Paul shouts out in his Letter to the Romans, “Who will save me from this body of death?”

Finding Salvation and Meaning

The proverbial Christian witness talk often relates how the speaker “was once lost, but now has been found” as the lyrics of *Amazing Grace* tell it, or, as the Merciful Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son says to the elder brother, “But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.”

Conversion stories always contain a before/after narrative. Without God, this darkness, emptiness, and sin was my life. With God, I have found salvation and meaning.

What forms have the darkness of sin and death taken in your life? How has sin, confusion, suffering, and despair paradoxically led you to know the valley of death, but also to experience Jesus’ mercy and forgiveness? How have you been lost and subsequently found?

Getting in touch with our “lostness” may feel like a futile or frightening exercise, but it has always led me to better appreciate and understand the enormity of God’s love and mercy. The crucifixion of the Son of God speaks eloquently of the threatening power of sin and death, but even more profoundly of the infinitely greater force of Divine Love and its redeeming goodness.

If we were just a little lost or slightly broken, we would only require a mild repair. The cross represents a radical realignment of the human person that changes the course of history.

Reflect

- 1. What forms have the darkness of sin and death taken in your life or the lives of those around you?*
- 2. How have you experienced a conversion from “lostness” to being found through the mercy of God? Are there areas of “lostness” that God may want to transform in your life?*
- 3. Have you ever shared your faith journey with someone? Pray that the Holy Spirit might prompt you to witness to God’s merciful love.*

God's Merciful Initiative

The third part of the *kerygma* is precisely this merciful initiative on the part of God to send us Jesus Christ as our Savior and Redeemer who liberates us from the power of evil and claims us for the Kingdom of His Father.

The parables of the Prodigal Son; the Lost Coin; the Good Shepherd; Jesus' encounters with Zacchaeus, the paralytic, Mary and Martha, Matthew, and Simon Peter; Christ's miracles, healings, actions of forgiveness, moments of service, and hours of preaching the Word all form the essence of God's definitive action as He boldly and creatively breaks into our darkness and rescues us from all torment and affliction.

Through Our Lord's sacrificial offering of Himself on Calvary and His Resurrection from the tomb on Easter morning, all of humanity is saved and set free from sin and death. Through baptism and our free acceptance of this gift we become adopted sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father.

The Scriptures, the Sacraments, moments of prayer, meditative reading and reflection, all actions of love and service become sacred portals through which Jesus breaks into our lives, offering us His very self as the only antidote which can cure and save.

I invite you to prayerfully consider, not only the fact that Jesus has saved you, but also how He has done so, precisely in the particulars of your life. Which people, experiences, moments, and encounters became the doors through which God entered into your heart and invited you into a love relationship with the Father?

Even though Christ has completed the work of salvation, the effects of this divine offer still need full realization in our lives. Jesus' preaching, ministry, forgiveness, life, death, and resurrection still need to be fully embraced and lived out in us. This mystical unfolding of God's presence and love in our hearts is the ultimate adventure of spiritual pilgrimage and Christian discipleship.

Cosmic Rescue Mission

I love to ponder the wondrous mystery of the Incarnation. Before the Word became flesh, I picture the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit looking

down upon the world and musing over the human situation.

The Father says, “They are so lost and broken! There is so much sin and hopelessness, violence, and fear among our children!”

The Holy Spirit chimes in, “They don’t even know who they are or that we love them. Sin and death have such a terrible grip on everybody.”

The Father responds, “One of us needs to go down there, teach them, love them, and bring them home to us.”

And I imagine the Son raising His hand and quietly offering, “Father, I will go.”

The whole Christ event is that cosmic rescue mission! God created everything good and beautiful, we messed it up through sin and selfishness, and the Lord gives us a way through the shadow of death by coming in our flesh to heal and conquer the power of sin and death within us.

These evil forces do not vanish—we still live with the terrible consequences of both our own sins and those of others, and we will all die—but in Jesus Christ, God offers us the grace and mercy to transcend evil and receive both forgiveness and eternal life.

This extraordinary offer of salvation should overwhelm, shock, transform, and tantalize us!

I deserve punishment for my selfishness and sin, yet the Lord offers me pardon.

I am locked into the ancient curse of death, yet Jesus promises me eternal life.

Invite the Lord to enter more deeply within every fiber of your existence. Ask Him to take possession of your thoughts, words, attitudes, and actions. Thank Him for the inexpressible gift of salvation so tenderly offered. Jesus wants to reign on the throne of our hearts, walk in the garden of our souls, find a place to restfully dwell in the depths of our humanity, and be the very center of our existence.

Reflect

1. *Which people, experiences, moments, and encounters became the doors through which Christ entered your heart and invited you into an intimate love relationship with the Father?*
2. *Take some time to ponder the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. What prayer begins to well from your heart as you consider His gift for you?*
3. *What are some ways you bring Christ into the lives of those around you? What are some concrete ways you can bring more of Christ into your sphere of influence?*

Giving Witness to Christ

The fourth part of the *kerygma* is giving witness to the saving love of the Lord to others, to go forth as missionary disciples.

Too often as Catholics, we have quietly and individually lived out our faith, but seldom have we equipped believers to share that faith with those around them.

Believers focus on their relationship with God; missionary disciples help others grow their own spirituality. Believers embrace a deep prayer life which is seldom shared with other people; missionary disciples boldly and joyously pray with others out loud and speak of their love for Christ.

Any pastoral renewal seeks to help our leaders and people grow in their understanding and practice of missionary discipleship. We can look at missionary discipleship through the lens of Jesus' two commands, "Follow me" and "Go forth."

“Follow Me”

“Follow me” bids us to grasp the primary need to be consistently open to ongoing evangelization ourselves: letting others love and witness Jesus to us, pondering the many gifts and blessings that flow from our identity as beloved children of God; and thinking often about the joy and meaning given to us through faith, seeing our relationship with God as a divine romance of mission and purpose. All help us to reclaim and refresh our original call and keep us fired up in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Ongoing Christian formation is the second component of missionary discipleship, beginning in childhood, continuing in adolescence, and reaching all the way from maturity to old age. As life-long learners, we need solid and age-appropriate catechesis all the way through—a formation that is intellectually robust, morally clear, emotionally powerful, and deeply loving.

In other words, God wants to form our heads, hearts, will, soul, and actions to put the good news of the Gospel into constant motion. With the Bible, the Catechism, the lives and writings of the saints, and the profound knowledge contained in our whole Catholic tradition, we

have the needed tools to be solidly formed in the life and revelation of God.

In prayer, worship, and the Sacraments, we experience the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the depths of God's presence and love. A missionary disciple consistently prays every day, spending time with the Scriptures in meditation, offering praise, thanksgiving, and petition to the Lord, praying the Rosary or another devotion, spending time in silence and solitude, reading a spiritual book reflectively, and taking the time to boldly pray with others, especially family members and friends.

This prayer reaches its culmination in the celebration of the Sacraments, which make us adopted children of God, bearers of the indwelling of the Trinity, and recipients of God's mercy, forgiveness, and salvation. A missionary disciple finds the center of life in the Eucharist, faithfully participating in this fundamental experience of the Paschal mystery at least every Sunday and holy day, if not more often, and discovers the depths of God's mercy and forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

“Go Forth”

The second lens of missionary discipleship is Jesus' command to “go forth” and proclaim the

Gospel. Christian disciples call and form other disciples. This evangelizing task is urgent today, as we see more people, especially the young, disengage from the Church and question the utility of religion for their lives.

A fundamental need for us, as committed disciples, is to engage and listen to those who have drifted away, ceased joining the Sunday assembly, or are even hostile to what Catholicism offers.

We will be most effective in proclaiming the Gospel to others by living a joyful, generous, and faith-filled life. The most powerful tool of evangelization is the authenticity of true witness. We want others to say, “I don’t know what that person has, but I want it for me!”

Missionary disciples are both competent and confident to boldly pray with others, explain particular teachings of the Church, articulate their personal relationship with God, recommend good spiritual books and resources, generously serve the poor and sick, work for a more just and peaceful world, and be joyful, invitational witnesses of the Gospel.

Imagine if every practicing Catholic was busy cultivating three or four people they know—a family member, co-worker, fellow student,

friend, or neighbor—moving them toward a deeper discipleship in the Lord!

As we ponder the love of the Lord who rushes to rescue us from the shipwreck of our sin and death through Jesus' life-giving Paschal Mystery, let us commit to live in this luminous grace and proclaim it to others as the purpose and project of our human existence.

Reflect

1. *Reflect on the distinction between being a “believer” and being a “missionary disciple.” What is your honest reaction to being invited and commissioned to become a missionary disciple?*
2. *What do you do to continue your own formation and readiness to become a missionary disciple? How often do you pray and receive the Sacraments? Who are people who can support you in your mission?*
3. *Who is someone in your life that you can begin to pray for and extend invitations to spiritual friendship, moving them toward a deeper discipleship with the Lord?*

The Call to Inner Transformation

To be effective evangelizers, each of us baptized into Christ needs to effectively communicate what our Christian faith means, how we have experienced the Lord, and why everyone is invited to the abundance of Jesus' life and grace, freely offered to all.

In this context of God's passionate desire for us, the practice of our Catholic faith becomes our response in gratitude and praise for all that the Lord has done and will do.

Religion ceases being some dreary and heavy fulfillment of an obligation and becomes our embrace of the divine romance that beats at the heart of the universe and finds resonance in our own soul.

Sunday Mass, regular Confession, daily prayer, study of the Scriptures, the practice of mortification, service of the poor and needy, the embrace of virtue all become part of our response to the overwhelming truth that, in Jesus Christ,

we have become adopted children of the Father, purchased with the Precious Blood of the Son and anointed in the power of the Holy Spirit.

My great hope is that every person experiences the overwhelming, shattering, and shocking love of Christ in such a life-changing and definitive way that we become excellent Catholics, fiery disciples, a community on a mission, evangelized ourselves, and eager to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with everyone we meet.

This personal and communal transformation is the goal and purpose of our “Go Make Disciples” initiative, as we begin with our own need to hear the Gospel afresh and drink deeply of the Scriptures and our Tradition.

Imagine if every Catholic truly experienced and understood the *kerygma* of the Lord’s love and life within and around us!

Then, Mass attendance skyrocketing because we all understand the Eucharist as the sacred consummation of our relationship with God.

What if every Catholic in the diocese went to Confession once a month, so that we could experience the transforming fire of God’s mercy?

What would happen if everybody prayed every day—really prayed—meditating on the Scriptures and spending time with the Lord?

Our communities, marriages, families, and parishes would be transformed if every single person did these things. Works of mercy and justice would increase exponentially. The divorce rate would drop. Violence and crime would disappear and joy and peace would flourish.

No need to wait or postpone the good things of Heaven. Now is the time to boldly proclaim the Gospel!

Reflect

1. *Have you ever pondered what it means to be an adopted child of the Father purchased with the Precious Blood of Christ and anointed in the power of the Holy Spirit?*
2. *Pray for the Holy Spirit to give you the grace to respond with a passionate desire for Sunday Mass, regular Confession, daily prayer, and practice of mortification.*
3. *Call to mind the people and situations in your life to whom God may be calling you to bring the Good News—to be a missionary disciple.*

Appendix I

Kerygma Summary

The task of every vocation in the Church, from those in Holy Orders to Consecrated Religious to the lay faithful, is to proclaim the Gospel. This mission is the fundamental purpose of the Body of Christ.

A simple way to understand the *kerygma* is to imagine the content of your Christian elevator speech. If you were with someone who has never heard of Jesus Christ, or who has no religious faith, and you have five minutes to speak about your own belief, what would you say? What fundamentals constitute the absolute essence of Christianity and our convictions about Jesus? How do we both express and summarize the most significant message ever shared?

Many theologians today see four components in the *kerygma*.

- 1) God created us in His image and likeness with a will, heart, soul, mind, and body, so that we can enter into an intimate relationship with Him.
- 2) The effects of sin and death, both in our personal lives and the entire human race,

have pushed us into a state of alienation and brokenness.

3) Never giving up on us, Jesus Christ offers us new life through the mercy and forgiveness flowing from the Paschal Mystery.

4) When we accept the Lord's gracious offer, we become a new creation and are called to witness the love and truth of Christ to others as missionary disciples.

I invite you to reflect deeper on these four fundamental components of our Christian faith so that we might embrace our baptismal calling of missionary discipleship as we strive to welcome the Lord into our lives with renewed hearts and joyful spirits.

Appendix II

Four Holy Habits

For those serious about embracing the call to missionary discipleship, I encourage you to drink deeply of the Holy Spirit by practicing what we are calling the *Four Holy Habits*: (1) reclaiming Sunday as a day of Sabbath rest, with the Eucharist at the center; (2) 15 minutes of daily prayer; (3) monthly Confession of our sins; and (4) some form of penance on Fridays as an act of thanksgiving for the saving death of Christ.

RECLAIM SUNDAY

Make time for God (Holy Mass), family & community



REGULAR MORTIFICATION

Starting with penance on Fridays



DAILY PRAYER

Commit to at least 15 minutes



FREQUENT CONFESSON

At least once a month



Go Make Disciples Prayer

Heavenly Father, as You sent fiery tongues of the Holy Spirit on the Church gathered at Pentecost, so now send that same Spirit on the Diocese of Madison. Inflame us with wisdom and courage, evangelizing zeal, and greater charity, that we may be renewed in the Heart of Your Son and come to live ever more deeply Your Trinitarian life of sacrificial love. Through the Sacraments and Scriptures, in personal prayer and service of neighbor, may each of us be renewed for the sake of the saving mission of the Church: to proclaim the Gospel to every creature and make disciples in the Holy Name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

“It is the task of every vocation in the Church—from those in Holy Orders to Consecrated Religious to the lay faithful—to boldly proclaim the Gospel. This mission is the fundamental purpose of the Body of Christ.”

—Bishop Donald J. Hying

In this inspiring booklet, Bishop Hying shares the *kerygma* or basic message of the Gospel distilled to its shining essence. As missionary disciples, each of us is called to memorize its key components and begin to personalize it so that we can fulfill Our Lord’s mandate to “go make disciples.”



Let us allow Bishop’s teaching to transform us in a definitive way so that we will become excellent Catholics, fiery disciples, a community on a mission, evangelized ourselves, and eager to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with everyone we meet.



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