

That is our mission and purpose. What are we going to do with that command and those statistics? We can be observers. We can read the statistics, read the command of Jesus, and observe that it is overwhelming. We can critic missionaries and mission strategies or we can be participants. What God needs are participants. Some of us need to participate by going. God is still calling men and women to go to the utter most parts of the world and serve. We all can participate by giving. If God is calling us, we should go, but if God is not calling us then we should give to support those who choose to go. Today you can give and participate in what God is doing around the world. Don't be an observer, but a participant.

When Robin and I went to Hawaii on our 25th anniversary two years ago, there was a place on the Big Island called the End of the World. It is a popular cliff diving location. We were told about this place and how it was a great place to go and jump from the rocks and into the beautiful water below. On our last day, we decided to check it out. We climbed up over the lava rocks and found the location. It was already filled with many participants and observers. Some were just watching, but a group of young college students were there from a local Christian school that were on a retreat. These young people were missionaries all over the world and they had gathered for training. You could tell quickly that this group of young people had adventurous spirits. They were all climbing, jumping, and diving. I found myself looking down from the End of the World. It looked much higher than it appeared at first. There were some rocks you had to miss on the way down. Trying not to show my fear, I joked and laughed with the students. They encouraged me and gave me pointers. This was not the first time for me to cliff dive or jump. I use to do it all the time in the Smokey Mountains. I had also done some cliff jumping in the Colorado River in Arizona when I was a summer missionary in Lake Havasu. However, that was then and this was now. That was when my

bones and muscles were stronger and joints were limber. What was I doing? Robin, an observer by the way, was yelling from another point. Do it! Do it! I knew she was aware of how much life insurance I have and was well aware I was worth more dead than alive, as well as maybe 25 years was enough. I looked once more... took a deep breath and jumped out and into the clear blue. Falling, falling, falling, am I going to hit? Then splash into the deep blue sea.

It was my last day in HI. I will probably never be there again. It was my only moment and I had to choose to observe or participate. God presents moments in our lives for us to follow him. In those moments, we must decide if we are going to be observers or participants. How about it? How about embracing repentance, change, and adventure? No more standing on the bank observing others. Take that step of faith and fall into the water. Be a participant in the Kingdom of God.



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PARTICIPANTS OR OBSERVERS

Matthew 3:1-2
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When I was a student at the University of Tennessee, a young traveling preacher/evangelist would find his way to our campus every spring. Dressed in a suit and tie and carrying a cross, he would stand on the street corners, and other places on campus, to give his fire and brimstone sermons. He was always shouting demeaning comments to all the young women who walked by because they were wearing shorts, jeans or makeup. This preacher always attracted a crowd, discussions and usually a shouting match. I can remember standing in the back of the crowd watching the spectacle with many different feelings. As a Christian, on a large public university campus, I sometimes thought "this is not helping" in regards to any true effort of sharing the love of Christ. Then, I must admit, there were times when I would feel sorry for the young street preacher. I wondered if this was how the prophets of old were treated when their message was not popular or accepted. I would always think of that life experience when I read passages from the Bible, such as Matthew 3:1-12. Matthew's account of John the Baptist's ministry in the desert has some of the same qualities of that campus scene. The scene from Matthew contains a preacher, a crowd, participants, and those who were there to observe.

John the Baptist lived and worked in the desert. He was not part of the accepted religious culture. His dress and diet was unusual, as was his message and practice of baptism. Yet, as unusual as John seemed to be, he was obviously a charismatic figure and effective communicator.

Matthew wrote that people came out to him from Jerusalem, Judea and the whole region of the Jordan (v.5). The people were responding to John's message of repentance and being baptized as part of this moment of change in their lives. However, not everyone who came to the desert to see John came with the intent of repentance and baptism. Matthew also informed us the Pharisees and Sadducees were present in this desert scene. John would unleash his harshest remarks upon those from these two religious/political groups. John called them "a brood of vipers!" (v.7) and reminded them that they too must repent of their sins. John challenged their place in the Kingdom of God by suggesting that being a descendent of Abraham is not enough for their salvation (v.9). A life that produced "fruit keeping with repentance" is what was really needed. (v.8). John called them to have a change of heart and actions.

In verse 7, the statement gives us insight into the attitude and intent of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates the statement as "coming for baptism". However, the New International Version (NIV) translates this statement as "coming to the place where he was baptizing." The Greek literally says "coming to the baptism." If they were coming for baptism, then the rest of the encounter seems out of place. However, if the phrase was "coming to the place", then the words of John would ring true. If the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming for baptism, then they were going to participate and there was the hope of a changed life. If the religious leaders were only coming to the place of baptism, then they were there only to observe and critique while being entertained by the spectacle.

One small word can make a difference in our understanding this scene. Here was John announcing and ushering in the Kingdom of God and standing on the banks of the Jordan were those who were making an important choice. They were either going to be observers or participants. What is the difference between being an observer or participant in the Kingdom of God?

Participants are those who are willing to change their course while observers are reluctant to change. John's call to those at the Jordan that day was to confess your sins, repent and fall into the water. The term "repent" literally means to turn around and go in another direction. The word itself indicates change. Spiritually it indicates a beginning place of transformation.

It starts with falling into water.

On December 10, the next film in the popular "Chronicles of Narnia" series will be released. Called *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the story begins with two children, Lucy and Edmund, spending a dreary holiday with their cousin Eustace, a sour and unfriendly little boy. Lucy and Edmund have been to Narnia before, but Eustace hasn't, and he mocks them for their belief in this magical land. Suddenly, a painting of a ship on Lucy's wall comes to life, and the three children are drawn into Narnia. They fall into the ocean and are rescued by the sailing ship called the *Dawn Treader*. You might say that the film begins with a splash. Once safely on board, Lucy and Edmund are greeted by their old friend Caspian, who's now a king. He has embarked on a quest to find the Seven Lost Lords of Narnia, as he had earlier promised the lion Aslan. Traveling from island to island on the *Dawn Treader*, Caspian and the children run into dragons, dwarves, storms, slave traders, and even mer-people. The three children — especially the nasty cousin Eustace — are transformed by the experience.

If you're a fan of "The Chronicles of Narnia," you know that powerful things happen in this magical land. Author C.S. Lewis created the fantasy world to teach lessons about the Christian faith, and Aslan, his divine lion, is one of the best fictional representations of Jesus Christ. Although

Aslan is gentle and loving, Lewis says again and again that he's "not a tame lion."

The three children fall into the waters of Narnia and go on to encounter Aslan, the Christ. It is a transforming experience.

So, is falling into the waters of baptism. Now it is true that baptism does not transform you, but the repentance and confession that leads to baptism does. It begins the life long journey of being transformed into the image of Christ.

John would put it this way "produce fruit that is keeping with repentance." The fruit John speaks of is the character of our lives. John is reminding us that repentance, turning in another direction, creates the moment when we begin to live and be changed for Christ. Our lives then produce fruit that is in keeping with that initial decision. The production of fruit takes time. It requires a season of growth and maturity before it is ripe. However, when the fruit grows and matures attached to the tree the result is maturity. The picture John paints with his baptism is the opportunity to be a participant in the Kingdom of God. It requires change, repentance, and this begins a process of transformation. Participants embrace change.

Participants also embrace adventure. The observers at the bank of the Jordan were satisfied with the status quo. John addresses their satisfaction when he challenges their assumption that they are participants in the kingdom just because they are descendents of Abraham. John reminds them that their heritage is not enough. God can raise up children of Abraham from stones. The status quo would not work. What was needed was a desire for an adventure with God.

God told Abraham to go to a place that he would show him. That is mystery, which is adventure. Moses would lead the people through the wilderness for 40 years. During that time, God was creating a nation for himself. They would face many moments of uncertainty. That was an adventure. Jesus called his disciples and essentially asked them to lay down their lives, that which was certain, and follow him to uncertainty. That was a great adventure. Jesus' great commission was to go into all the world and make disciples. That is a great adventure.

"What's around the river bend? ..." So sings Pocahontas, the title character of Disney's animated film. The song "Just Around the River-bend" deals with choices never risked, with roads not taken. However, Pocahontas' words (courtesy of songwriters Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz) are very ancient — far more ancient, as it happens, than 18th-century Virginia, where the events of the movie take place. The first person to say, "You can't step in the same river twice" was Heraclitus, an ancient Greek philosopher. He means that change is the only thing we can count on in life. "Change alone is changeless," says he. Just as the river constantly flows — so that each time we insert our foot, we come in contact with different water — so life is ceaselessly flowing, ever beckoning us to venture "just around the river bend."

We cannot serve Christ and choose the status quo and the safe way out. To follow Jesus requires that we embrace adventure, mystery, faith in God's future with Jesus. I think most of us want God to give us safety not challenge us to change. Yet, Jesus is not depicted as one who is safe. Jesus is not someone who came to tell us to play nice. Phillip Yancey writes, "How would telling people to be nice to each other get a man crucified? What government would execute Mister Rogers or Captain Kangaroo?"

He did not come to make us safe. C.S. Lewis writes, "Safe? Who said anything about safe?" Course he is not safe. But he is good.

Are you going to be an observer or a participant? Theodore Roosevelt wrote:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; because there is not effort without error and shortcomings; but who does actually strive to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the

great devotion, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

Today is World Missions Sunday and I am going to ask you to choose to be an observer or a participant. Listen to some statistics for a moment:

- 3,724 people groups are not engaged at all with the Gospel (*as reported April 2010*)
- 6,426 unreached people groups (*those with less than 2 percent of people who profess to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; as reported July 2009*)
- 1.7 billion with little or no access to the Gospel
- 1.5 billion Muslims – 22 percent of the world's population
- Christian witness among China cities less than 1 percent
- 3 percent evangelical believers among Ethiopia's 82 million people
- 355 million in South America do not know Christ
- Less than 1 percent Christian among more than 270 million living in the Central Asia region
- 89 percent of North African and Middle Eastern people groups are unreached
- 311 people groups in India have no known evangelical believers

- Only 1,600 believers among 1.6 million Muong of Northern Vietnam

In contrast to those statistics are these words, "Go therefore into all the world and make disciples. Baptizing them in the name Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." That is the Great Commission. That is the last word of Jesus to us.