

Heaven's headlines

Horrific headlines roiled over Chicago like angry storm clouds this past summer. Murder numbers skyrocketing. Shootings being tallied literally by the minute. August was Chicago's most violent month in 20 years. As I write this, on a Monday morning, the headline for the weekend is, "17 Killed and 41 Shot."

One incident stands out because it was early in the season and close to home.

"Six-year-old Girl Shot in Back on Logan Square Block Rocked by Violence." ABC 7 Chicago interviewed Jeremy Crowe, one of our pastors, in the wake of the madness. He talked about the work Armitage Baptist does day in and day out, year after year in the name of Jesus. The media, the general public, politicians, and police want to know, "What are you doing to help quell the violence?"

In the face of this bloody tsunami, the routine Gospel work of a local church may seem insignificant, if not irrelevant. It seems removed from the immediacy, the drama, the tragedy of human bodies ripped apart, families shattered, and lives snuffed out.

For the most part, the work of Christ goes on unheralded. We know the work of our church, the work your church does day in and day out, week in and week out, year in and year out is what the world needs, and it holds the ultimate answer.

It may seem a farmer planting corn row by row in the middle of Iowa has little to do with a child in North Sudan who has not eaten for days. However, without food from somewhere there is no hope for that child. The tedious routine work of the farmer is not just necessary — it's vital. It is a piece of the solution.

The night Jesus was born, Bethlehem slept. When the sun rose the next morning, you can be assured it was a typical day in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Judea, and across the Roman Empire. No TV trucks. No photographers. No scribes. No

lines waiting to worship. Sure, some shepherds got the news and went looking for the savior. But sleepy little Bethlehem went on with its business. There were no headlines.

Rome didn't care. The empire carried on. Thirty years later, Jesus' home folk tried to run him off a cliff. The holy city, Jerusalem, killed him, lied about the empty tomb. Life as usual was only temporarily disrupted by the spiritual explosion of Pentecost. However, it's clear reality prevails as believers are scattered by persecution several chapters later. Headlines in scripture, not in history.

Over the next generation, the Gospel of Jesus Christ penetrates the empire. City after city sees a church planted. Believers multiplied. Good works abound. There is an occasional ruckus, riot, or earthquake. I'm fairly certain the Philippi Herald did not read, "Prisoners Don't Flee Quake Damaged Jail — Jailer Gets Saved!"

The empire strikes back with a vengeance! Waves of Gospel advance are met with savage persecution for generations to come.

All that to say, Jesus created a stir, but he did not win Jerusalem to himself. His church was birthed and then was pretty much evicted. Rome never blinked. Local churches influenced and impacted the whole empire. No headlines.

Much of the work of evangelism goes on quietly, privately, far from public notice. Over lunch. At work. Standing next to a locker in a school hallway. Across an aisle on a commuter train. An email to a distant family member. A phone conversation. A prayer of repentance and faith after a church service.

Pastors nurture and guide disciples in Christ-likeness. Counselors oversee miraculous marriage transformations. Small group leaders and Sunday Bible study teachers sow the Word into minds being renewed. Thousands of churches reach out to pray for and evangelize youth, raising money to run programs, sponsor kids to camp.

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Who is recording the murders that never happen? The shootings that never took place? Bullets that were never fired? Divorces that don't happen? Children who were never abused? The drugs not bought? The alcohol not consumed? The drivers that quit driving drunk. The domestic abuse Satan scheduled that the Gospel canceled? Who is counting the money that wasn't embezzled, the lies that weren't told, the babies not born out of wedlock?

I'll tell you who and where. God in heaven sees and notes every advance of the Gospel, all the evil it cancels, and all the good it produces. He knows every tear not shed, every heart not broken, every family not shattered, every life not taken, and every war not started.

This year, Christmas will mark yet another celebration by Christians all over the globe who have provided fresh water, started and operated hospitals and clinics, served AIDS victims, loved and housed the homeless, provided tons of food and clothing to needy people, Founded and funded schools, served immigrants and refugees, addicts, and young girls who decided not to have an abortion, as well as women who have. Believers have pursued, rescued, and served trafficked chattel. They have opened their hearts and homes adopting orphans and wards of the state.

All this and more, because the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

Make no mistake, heaven's headlines are the ones that matter.

"Unto you is born this day, a Savior ..."

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