

Series: STAPLES: BASICS for your FAITH JOURNEY – September 13, 2009

THE RADICAL, SCANDALOUS, AMAZING GOOD NEWS!

John 1:1-14; Luke 15: 11-32

1. Has anyone here ever gone camping? They make camping stuff light—because you have to take everything with you that you’re going to need, including food. Has anyone ever gone camping with young children? **You are amazing!** It’s hard enough just taking them to the grandparents for an overnigher!

-I was thinking about some of the early settlers who traveled by wagon from Pennsylvania to settle here in Markham back around 1800. Think of what it would be like to pack for a trip like **that!** No stores, restaurants or bathrooms! I did a little research on this—and found that the wagons in wagon trains weren’t for the travelers. They were for all the stuff they needed for their journey--**staples**. Not the store you go to celebrate... **the most wonderful time of the year**—or even the metal kind you put through paper.

- a. **Staples** were essentials. Things you use a lot. Sacks and barrels of flour, sugar, salt, corn meal, rice beans—and, of course, Tim Horton’s coffee. They would also carry dried fruit, tools, household utensils—and a couple of 50 gallon barrels of water.
- b. We, together, are on a spiritual journey. There is a really, **really** important part of it that’s corporate. Like those wagon trains, we’re all on an adventure—traveling together, helping each other, depending on each other. And I hope you will **fully** engage in that **together** part which involves being in a smaller face to face group.

-There’s also a personal side to that journey that’s just between you and God. As I thought about this journey—I asked, “What are the **staples?** You know, the **essentials** that we need to stay strong and healthy? To live, love and serve—as we were meant to live, love and serve? To not just **survive**—but **thrive?** To **finish well?**

-For example. The inner assurance that we have eternal life. For **sure!** God accepts us. Has the thought ever crossed anyone’s mind, “I’ve put my faith in Jesus—but am I really accepted, warts and all—or have I fallen off the list?”

-What about the assurance our sins—even the most shameful ones are forgiven. I don’t know about you—but I’ve done things in my life that haunt me. How do you know **for sure** that you’ve been forgiven? For **everything!**

-What about reading God’s Word and understanding how it fits my life? And how can I have meaningful conversations with Him? Has anyone here ever struggled with that? Have you ever thought bad thoughts like, “I’m not enjoying this very much—and I’ll bet God isn’t either!” How do you **feed** yourself—and enjoy the meal!

-What about temptation? Has anyone here ever struggled with saying **No** to the destructive things you really **need** to say **No** to? Has anyone besides me ever

had a struggle with being willing to say yes - give your life for what's good and right and **lasts**?

-And why is it so **hard** to let Jesus be Lord. You know, run the show? How do I deal with this proud, defiant streak in me that thinks **I'm** more right than He is? How follow His leadership—and **enjoy** it? can give more than lip service to His leadership—and then **refuse** to follow it?

- c. Today I want to start a series of talks that deal with some of the core issues of this spiritual journey we're taking together. I'd like you to participate. First, if there's a core question you have—email it to me. I'll try to address as many as possible. Second, we're going to have a Q&A time after each talk. Third, get involved in a face-to-face group where you can take things to a deeper level.
- d. At the core, our gatherings here are not about religion and lists of things to do or not do; our gatherings are about us loving God, loving others, serving the world—and **finishing well!** Are you in?

- 2. In this first talk, I want to talk about something that is at the very foundation of making any spiritual journey. This foundation is something Jesus called the **Good News of the Kingdom!** It's the Gospel. It's what God is up to in restoring everything and everyone to Himself through the life, death and resurrection of his Son—Jesus. I've talked about this before—a lot—but I just want to make sure that we're clear on what it means for us.

-To understand the Bible—you have to understand the core problem it deals with. Sin. Sin is, at its core, the human bent to rebel against the god of the universe and be god of our own lives. That is, decide what's right, what's wrong, do what **we** want, and set our own direction.

-In the beginning pages of the Bible, we find a creation that's breathtaking—and people who live in harmony with God and each other. Rebellion against God's leadership wrecked **everything**. The relationship with God was broken, our relationships with each other turned selfish and violent—and the effect on **all** creation has been staggering. God said that this rebellion, sin, would cause death—and it did. Everything—including this planet and the universe—is in the process of dying. And God's plan ever since it happened—has been to make **everything** new. And **that's** why Jesus came.

-People have a **lot** of different theories about the cosmos, people, how we got here, what life is about. One thing **everyone** can agree with; evil is real and prevalent and destructive. Every single person who has ever lived has experienced the pain and decay of sin—even though they might not call it that.

- a. What the Bible teaches makes sense of why we have these lofty ideas of the way things **should** be—but can never get there. We were created in the image of God—and that's why we long for perfection and life and love and peace. That's why we **know** what is good and right—and do **some** of it—but either screw it up ourselves—or get stopped and frustrated by the sludge of life.

There's this deep, frustrating, destructive bent in us toward selfishness and arrogance and impatience and jealousy and hatred. We'd like to blame the problems of the world on someone else—but left to ourselves, we create more problems in life than we solve.

-This rebellion against God has vandalized the world; it has twisted everything. And that's why in every newspaper—on every day--we see war and oppression—instead of the peace and freedom we crave. We **know** it's stupid; every thinking person has denounced it—but it's like we can't stop ourselves. Changing our methodology or politics or economic policy or judicial system isn't enough. The human **heart** is the place where motive is formed; the **heart** is the driving force behind all we do. It's in our **hearts** where our decisions are made. And it's our **hearts** that need to change.

- b. Right after the Fall—we see God making a way for humans to be reconciled to Him and to each other—to offer a way back home. The promise is that everything **will** one day be restored; that the **shalom** of God—the peace, harmony, wholeness, and joy we were created for—will once again win the day.

-But it's an excruciatingly slow process. God sandbags the spread of evil. He chooses a family of faith—through whom the world will be blessed. And at each juncture this drama—particularly at the junctures of failure, there's always someone pointing forward to God's Anointed One. **He** will make all things right.

-But it **seems** that everything ends in a colossal failure. Abraham's descendents forget who they are again and again. The story of the nation of Israel seems to be one where, despite a few bright spots, they're conquered and humiliated over and over again. The thought occurs to them, **Where's God? What about his promise?**

3. Then in the middle of both expectation and despair, a baby shows up in Bethlehem one night—declared by the angels to be the Messiah. The promised Savior. God with us—right in the middle of our mess—right in the middle of the flies and stench of a barn. Born of a virgin.

-What was very clear to those who knew Jesus was that God had permanently intersected history. The whole thing was **so** surprising! Quiet. Totally unexpected. The people in that culture expected that a special prophet would come, kick Rome's butt, and re-establish Israel to her glory days. No one **ever** expected that God Himself would come.

-Another surprise. He looked like every other human being—and seemed very human. And he didn't hang with the religious; he hung around with the riff-raff. The bottom-feeders in that culture seemed to **love** Him. Surprisingly—all the prophecy buffs didn't like Him all that much—or what He stood for. In fact, they **hated** him!

-Another surprise. When He began teaching and calling people to follow—He taught about Himself. That **He** was the way. That if they'd seen Him—they'd seen the Father. That if they rejected Him—they'd rejected the Father. That infuriated the

religious elite. He was claiming to be God—and they knew it. So they had him executed.

- a. As Jesus was hanging on the cross; two groups of people watched. One thought, “Finally! We’ve **nailed** this imposter who claimed to be the Son of God!” The other group thought, “How could this happen? The things God is behind don’t end like this!”

-And they didn’t! Jesus was only in the grave three days—and rose from the dead. He wasn’t resuscitated so that He grew old and died later. This was **different**. He was risen. He had a body—but it was the kind of body that never grows old, never dies.

- b. When Jesus rose from the dead, what He had been saying all along started to become clear. He’d said that as the Good Shepherd, he would lay down his life for the sheep. Somehow, by paying for our sin on the cross—He died as our substitute. In my place. In your place. And in dying and rising again—He defeated death once for all. And by dying for sin—he defeated sin—and made it possible for **all** people and **all** things to become new. Funny, the one thing religious people thought would end life—gave life—ended death—and ended religion once for all as a way to God. One of his closest disciples put it like this at the beginning of his Gospel:

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. He came into the very world he created, but the world didn’t recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son. (John 1:1-4, 10-14 NLT)

- c. What Jesus did was astounding! Intuitively, people think that the way to God, or the way to Heaven is by doing good things—or religious things. The Good News of Jesus is that the playing field is totally level. We all come just as we are, put our faith in what Jesus has done on the cross—and the Spirit gives us the desire and the power to be changed—and to be an influence for good and for change in the world.

-And everyone can come—just as they are. The good. The bad. The respectable. The scandalous. People who have a brilliant future. People who have no future.

-There’s only one way for this to happen. Jesus. Total faith in Him. And to put our faith in him means we have to lay down our religious pride and moral pride.

The pride we take in how far we've come and how much we've done—how broad-minded and free-thinking we are. And we humble ourselves before this Son of God who laid down his life for us. It's called **grace**—and it's **totally** counter-intuitive. Life, hope, forgiveness, restoration, peace, joy, the chance and the power to make a difference comes as a **gift**. No one can earn it—but everyone can have it!

-And we all know what faith is. We exercise it every day. When you text a friend—you hit send—believing that it won't get hijacked in cyberspace. When you eat a meal—you exercise **faith** that someone who hates you didn't poison it. You can't have a life in this world without faith—and you can't have eternal life through Jesus without faith, either.

4. The Good News gets even better. God is already at work creating the kind of world everyone longs for—and the kind of persons everyone longs to be. How many of you have ever lost something? Through Jesus—everything—**everything** you've ever lost will be restored. This Kingdom Jesus is working on right not—in secret—in places no one would ever dream to look is amazing! And every promise God has ever made to his people will be restored. That, friends, is the **Good News!**
 - a. And he's at work in us, those who have put their faith in Him, to invest our resources and our lives in what He's doing. His Spirit, living in the core of our lives, begins to change our hearts. Our money and stuff isn't quite as important—and we learn to give. Our egos get smaller—we don't have to be right all the time—or even most of the time—and we begin to make people—not wreck it.

-The Spirit gives us power to let go of habits and attitudes that are destroying us. He begins healing grudges we've held for years; He gives us patience where we've raged and pulled tantrums. Our value system, over time—gets flipped. Multiply that kind of inner change hundreds—thousands—**millions** of times over—and you can see how God is changing the world—**one life at a time!**
 - b. And to address the prejudice and bitterness between people, Jesus has broken down all barriers; between men and women, between the rich and poor, between people of different races, between laborers and CEOs; between the illiterate and the Ph.D.s, between the savage and the civilized; between the vegetarians and the meat-etarians! Suddenly, all of these stupid barriers that create so much chaos and pain and injustice—are GONE! And Jesus is at work right now in my heart and yours—to help us see that.
 - c. I was recently listening to the words of a song I know—but don't know the title of, "...they paved Paradise, and put up a parking lot." Have you ever wished we could reverse the damage we've done to this planet? God will use us, the ones who have created the damage, to begin fixing it. And with the final intervention of God—this earth will be restored to its original breathtaking beauty! **All** things will be made new!

-Now. How many of you think this is **GOOD NEWS**? That's the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. That's what created such a stir. That's why people were willing to give their lives to say, "God showed up! The Name He was giving is—**JESUS! SAVIOR!** Because He came to save us from the accumulated mess of sin—in this world, and in our own lives! He came so we could be made new; be bought back—redeemed—and so that ALL CREATION could be redeemed and released from its slavery and suffering.

5. I want to close this morning with two thoughts. The first is the most **shocking** think about the Good News Jesus taught. It's **who** needs it—and who typically responds to it. Think for a minute about the single most toxic criticism of the Church of Jesus in our world. It's that it's filled with self-righteous, smug, judgmental people. How is that possible—when, with grace, we have **no** reason to brag or look down on others? -Jesus told a powerful story that really puts it in a nutshell. I mentioned it last week. It's called the story of The Prodigal Son. Most people are familiar with the first part—about the younger son who demanded his inheritance, blew it, and came crawling home—only to be magnificently, lovingly, joyfully embraced by the Father as a loved son.
 - a. Most people in our world would say, "Yep, there **are** those younger brother, rebellious, womanizing, whiskey swigging, violent types out there who need to get their lives straightened out! They need the Good News! They need grace!
 - b. But the way Jesus **ended** this story would've scandalized **everyone**. And if we truly hear it—it's still offensive. The older brother in this story was the good, faithful son who worked the fields, kept his nose clean, did what his Dad wanted—he was the son we'd all like to have. "You make me **proud**, boy!" -But in **Jesus'** story, he's the one at the end who's furious with his brother—and furious, it turns out, with his Dad. Why? Sibling rivalry. The way it turns out—**both** sons were interested in what their Dad had—not really their Dad. One demanded it; the other worked for it. And the really **strange** ending to this story is that it's the younger son, who humbles himself, is reunited with the Father—and the older son who's alienated.
 - c. Know what's shocking? Jesus' life and Jesus' Gospel proved that the scoundrels, crooks and bottom feeders aren't the least likely to come home to the Father; it's the **really good moral** people. The people who are responsible, who help others, who give to good causes. Earning your way into God's favor stokes your pride. Doing good things, learning the Bible, praying, giving—makes you **better** than others. Deserving of God's favor. -Elder brother types obey God to get things; to get the good life. They don't necessarily obey God because they love Him and want to resemble Him; they do it to make God indebted to them—and **control** Him.
 - d. To understand what Jesus is saying here, you need to understand that the religious people **most offended** by him—who never saw who He really was—were **really good people**. They were the ones others stood in awe of; parents would say, "See that guy? I want you to grow up and be like **him!**"

-And older brother types **still exist**. The early church struggled with them. And many churches are **filled** with them. My point is that we **all** need to come back to the Good News. We **all** need to keep coming back to the transformation God most wants to see in us: it's not that we become good and moral—although that will happen. It's that we become **loving people to the core of who we are**.

-It is possible to do good things, feed the hungry, help the homeless, keep your nose out of the garbage, give generously—not because you love people and love God—but because you love being noticed; you love the reputation that being good or generous or compassionate brings you—and the fact that God owes you a good life. You like the feeling of being “better” than others. Instead of becoming more and more loving and patient and grace-filled, you become more critical and judgmental—superior. And friends, let's be clear—this stuff is garbage. It's not of God.

- e. Elder brothers tend to think, “The good people—you know, people like us—are in; the bad people—like **them** are the main problem with this world!” Younger brothers tend to say, “No, the openminded and tolerant people are in; the bigoted and narrow-minded religious-types are the **real** problem in the world—and they're out!”

-According to Jesus—the **humble** are in—and the **proud** are out. Tim Keller in the book, **The Prodigal God**, profoundly summarizes the Good News or the **Gospel** like this: “...**everyone** is wrong; **everyone** is loved; and **everyone** is called to recognize this and change” (p. 45).

6. The second really, **really** important thing to know is that the power behind the Good News in this world is not us and our efforts to be right and do good; it's the Holy Spirit of God. The **Spirit** brings the Good News of Jesus to us—and to our world through us. When Jesus died, was buried, resurrected—and then ascended to the Father—He made it possible for the same Spirit who had filled him and raised Him from the dead—to now live in His Followers. He quietly gives us **profound** power to act, to persevere, to love as Jesus loved and to be changed **so** profoundly that it could be called a **new birth**.

-Friends—please catch this—the only way—the **ONLY WAY** we can be so transformed over time that we drop our greed, grudges, sinful habits—and our smug, superior glory-hogging, self-centered ways—is by the power of the Spirit. He comes to live in us, not as a resident soother—or cop; but to give us the inner life of Jesus—and then empower us for **His** Mission. After Jesus rose from the dead--and before He ascended to the Father, he told his followers to **wait** for the Spirit. The reason? We can't do **anything** without his power.

- a. Over time, the Spirit will **always** lead us to become more loving people. Paul says that the natural fruit that comes from the Spirit's presence in our lives is love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control. When He is able to fully possess us—live through us—we have

power and endurance beyond anything we could imagine. We have power to love God with all we are—and power to love others as ourselves.

-And when that happens—Good News becomes more than a Gospel message and hope for the future. When the **Spirit** of Good News lives in us—and we cooperate with his transforming power? Well, **we** become Good News wherever we are. Not right away—but **eventually** we become Good News to the person who had the courage to marry us. Over time--we become Good News to the children we bear and **Good News** for where we are employed, for those who are friends of ours, who live next door to us.

- b. Remember how, at the beginning, we talked about **Staples?** The Holy Spirit is not just a Staple. Without Him, without his power, without the love and grace and comfort and passion He brings—there **is** no journey! The Spirit is not an add-on; a **nice-to-have-Him-riding-shotgun**. He is the source of all the staples—assurance, forgiveness, power to say no, the One who speaks to your heart through God’s Word, the One who prays through you—and the One who will empower you to accomplish the part you’ve been called to play in **Jesus’** Mission.

-He’s your guarantee that you’ll fulfill your mission; that you will one day walk across the finish line into the arms of the Father. The deal is—you can live a fairly moral life without the Spirit. You can do good for others—feed the hungry, clothe the naked, show compassion, build houses for the homeless and be generous without the Spirit. Lots of people do. You can even get to know your Bible and pray wonderful prayers without the Spirit. Lots of people do—and it makes them feel good; superior to others.

-But **you can’t live the life Jesus calls you to live**—a life lived loving God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind—and loving others as yourself without Him. And every day, you and I have a choice. Will I walk **in** the Spirit—with humility, with grace, with patience, with peace and forgiveness in my heart? Or will I just do life in **my** power?

- c. Sometimes people ask, “How?” Well, **Ask!** Jesus said,

“So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.” (Luke 11:13 NLT)

-If you’ve responded to the Good News of Jesus, turned from trying to live your own way—and put your faith solely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus—the Spirit already lives in you. He is with you wherever you go—in your neighborhood, at work, shopping, engaging with others. He just waits to be invited into your every day life!

7. There’s something really cool going on in the GTA that I found out about just a couple of months ago. It’s called **Moveln**. A group of 20-somethings held a conference at People’s Church last May and talked about groups of mostly single 20-somethings

moving into a number of neighborhoods—mostly in the GTA—where there was no one living the Good News. So, now there are 12 different MoveIn groups—living in fairly cramped quarters—in strategic areas. They aren't there to preach and hand out Bibles and tracts. They are there to pray and live out the Good News in ways that love God and love others. This makes sense of how the Message states a verse I read earlier:

8.

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish. (John 1:14 Msg)

-You don't necessarily need to move into another neighborhood, or find another job or another school, or go to another city or country. You and I are called to **be** the Good News where we are right now. So much so, that others could say of us, "Man, it's **Good News** that **they're** here!" Is it? See, **everyone** needs the radical, scandalous amazing Good News that Jesus died to bring!