

“Witness”

Hello? Anybody out there?

Actually it looks as though this is a reasonable turnout for a Sunday in late May. Has anybody checked for absentees? Maybe predictions of the rapture were a bit overblown... or maybe it just happened so fast (the veloci-rapture) that we didn't notice... or maybe we're just not the rapturin' kind.

I have enjoyed poking fun at these predictions, but it's pretty small-minded of me, really. At some level I admire the fact that Harold Camping, the rapture guy, is willing to risk ridicule for his convictions (or maybe for the publicity). My problem with him is not that his predictions have been wrong, but that his concept of God bears no resemblance to the God I know. (Probably he would agree.) A God who delights in inflicting suffering on folks who haven't fallen into line seems completely different from the God Jesus describes in his parables of the lost, like the shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep behind to go searching for the one who is missing. That God is out to being everybody into the fold.

So if it's quite all right with Harold Camping, I think we'll just go on with the season of Easter around here ... it's the Fifth Sunday of Easter. In some respects I suppose it feels as though we're dragging out the holiday. But the wonderful thing about having a whole season of Easter is that we can keep revisiting what became of the good news. Despite our trumpets and finery, Easter actually starts slowly and quietly, with disbelieving disciples and whispered news of an empty tomb. But as the weeks go by the news spreads and begins to change the world.

As the book of Acts tells the story, Easter spreads through the agency of the Holy Spirit. It encounters fierce opposition. But it will not be stopped, cannot be contained, and it keeps on changing hearts and lives with an irresistible power.

In each generation the faith finds witnesses: men and women who with their words and lives tell of the loving God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Ominously the Greek word translated “witness” is also the word for “martyr.” And in this morning's lesson we encounter the story of Stephen: an early Christian witness and the first Christian martyr.

As a model for Christian witness, Stephen seems to combine the best and the worst.

Our lesson for today feels like walking in in the middle of a movie. The protagonist is in a pickle... how did he get there? We first meet Stephen in Acts 6, when the early church is undergoing some staff restructuring and realignment of job descriptions. (The more things change, the more they stay the same!) As the church grows the Apostles discover that they're spending all their time looking after the needs of the community and neglecting their specifically apostolic duties of prayer,

study and preaching. So they recruit a handful of lay ministers who will serve on their behalf. Listed first among these servants is Stephen, described as “full of faith and the Holy Spirit.” It is because of him that our lay ministers who are trained to offer pastoral care are called “Stephen Ministers.”

Evidently Stephen is not only full of faith and the Holy Spirit; he’s also full of blarney: an argumentative sort who is both eloquent and abrasive. He begins to make a name for himself performing signs and wonders and debating in the synagogue. He’s good at this: maybe not good enough to persuade too many people, but good enough to make them mad.

He is accused of blasphemy and brought before the council, where he functions in his trial as the one and only witness. But when he’s testifying on his own behalf he’s not so effective. He launches into a painfully long biblical tome, fifty-three verses worth, touching on Abraham and Joseph and Moses and Aaron and Joshua and David and Solomon and concluding with these tender, conciliatory words: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.” (7:51-53)

Sometimes the best defense is a good offense... but not in this case. Stephen’s defiant and accusatory speech understandably infuriates his captors... end of flashback, begin this morning’s lesson.

But at this point, something in Stephen changes and he becomes a very different sort of witness. Instead of rehashing biblical history and hurling venomous accusations, he has a vision; and he tells what he sees: “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (7:56) He testifies to the risen, living Christ.

But it’s too late. His captors cover their ears and refuse to listen. (They would have made lousy Stephen Ministers.) They drag Stephen out to stone him. In a nice little touch, Luke (the same person who wrote the Gospel According to Luke also wrote the book of Acts) notes that “The witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.” This is none other than Saul of Tarsus, who will become the Apostle Paul; but here he’s running the coat check concession for the dark side. Maybe he’s sort of like a caddy: “Let’s see, sir: from this distance I think perhaps a #3 rock. Note the slight slope from right to left and the breeze out of the north.”

Forgive the attempt at humor. This really is quite a gruesome scene: an angry mob in righteous wrath venting their fury on a defenseless victim. Sadly that scene has been repeated throughout history in countless lynchings and impromptu executions. But if the crowd is beyond reason, Stephen is also beyond enraging them. The scene describing his death intentionally echoes Luke’s account of Jesus’ own death on the cross. Stephen prays, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Remember how Jesus prayed, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”? (Luke 23:46) And then

Stephen, falling to his knees before the furious barrage, prays for his executioners, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them,” as Jesus prayed for those who crucified him, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34) Then Stephen dies.

What makes Stephen the first Christian martyr is that his death, as well as his life, bears witness to Christ. At his best, Stephen speaks, in words and actions, of the Christ he knows. Never does he speak more eloquently than in the manner of his death, when his tone has changed from accusation and judgment to trust in the goodness of God and prayers of forgiveness for his adversaries.

We get this story in the season of Easter as a testimony to the power of the Good News to spread in the face of opposition. Our God is a God of life, and death does not have the last word. This message spreads through the lives (and sometimes through the deaths) of people who have so vivid a vision of a God of justice and truth and love that they have to share it with the world. Easter spreads through witnesses; and they’re not spiritual superstars who do everything right. They are people like Stephen, people like you and me.

This is a challenging thought to us. We treat religious conviction as though it were a matter of opinion or of personal preference; or an element of self-expression like fashion. We are reluctant to voice our convictions, sometimes even to ourselves. We’re afraid of being overbearing like some people who have cornered us, demanding to know if we’ve been saved; or we’re afraid of becoming an object of ridicule like the rapture guy whose fifteen minutes of fame are fading fast.

The problem with theologically open-minded folks like us isn’t that we don’t practice what we preach. We’re very much at home being generous with our money or our time for causes that align with our values. We think faith is supposed to find expression in the world... at least through our giving and our doing. No, our greater problem is that we don’t know how to preach what we practice. We can support a cause, but we can’t really tell you why, or how our do-gooding is rooted in what we believe about God.

But think about it this way. If God is a God of justice and love... if Christ’s way of living for others is God’s will for us all and the best window we have to what is most important in life... if the calling to be a Christian is to walk the way Jesus walked... then we’re called to be witnesses to that way of love, aren’t we? We’re called to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly—but not necessarily silently—with our God. If we’re really going to live by our convictions, we need to find ways of articulating those convictions: not in the angry, accusatory way Stephen started out, but in a way that really bears witness to the God of love.

A lot of us may have the inclination to vent our spleen on folks who in our estimation haven’t lived out the Christian faith as they should have: Christians we see as judgmental, exclusive, and harsh. But our righteous anger is not an ally. What did Jesus pray, and Stephen after him? “God, forgive them, they know not what they do.” What does it mean for us to be witnesses to that kind of love?

This week on Public Television and elsewhere we've been commemorating the Freedom Riders of the 1960's, mostly young college students who risked their lives to ride racially integrated buses through the Deep South. In many instances their courage came from their faith in a God of justice. They were willing to risk themselves to bear faithful witness to the vision they had had of a world in which God's will is done on earth as in heaven. Through their nonviolent protest they exposed the evils of racism, discrimination and violence—all of which were unleashed on them to the horror of a watching world. Their witness helped change the world.

“I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” The God I know and love is the loving God of justice who raised Jesus Christ from the dead! How can I not stand up for what I believe? How can I not bear witness?

It may not come in so dramatic a way as it did for the Freedom Riders, or for Stephen. But the opportunity to bear witness will come... this week... today. Just tell of the God you know. Through your words and through the life you live, tell of the God you know. The God of Easter needs a witness.

Amen

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