

“Witness”
 November 13, 2016
 Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost
 Text: Luke 21:5-19

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"

And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately."

Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven."

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name."

This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict."

You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Introduction

So, a candidate's induction into membership includes the question "Will you be loyal to the United Methodist Church, and uphold it by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?"

And the candidates answer, as they did today, "I will."

Five ways we uphold the Church: prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. The first four are self-explanatory. The fifth however, "witness" may be less readily understood. What is your Christian witness? How and when is it expressed?

As we follow the Common Lectionary and arrive at the end of the liturgical year and move into Advent, we begin to hear about end times in the Gospel readings. Today's reading from Luke is an example of this. And in this passage Jesus brings up a moment in which our witness will be called for.

All is Temporary

The story begins with the realization that everything in life is temporary. Nothing is permanent, nothing remains. Luke writes,

"When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus says, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

All is temporary.

But then they ask him, *"Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"*

Was Jesus referring to what would happen in 70 AD when Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple torn down? Was he referring to the end of the world? We do not know. But what is clear is that for as magnificent as the Temple in Jerusalem was, it, like everything else would only be temporary. All is temporary; everything around us—except for the Word of God; the *logos*; that is, the reality of Jesus Christ.

End Times?

End times. We've all heard about the end times. Some focus exclusively on this topic in their ministry and preaching, believing we are now in the end times. Even Jesus has something to say about it:

He says, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately."

Worried that we are living in the end times? We have been living in the end times since the death and resurrection of Jesus. Anything following that turning point in history is technically the end times—the times that are best described as the “already and the not yet.” The “already” meaning the breaking-in of the kingdom of heaven as evidenced in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the “not yet” pointing to the eventual complete manifestation of that kingdom. So, beware of those who try to convince you of timelines and finagling of current events to fit into some scenario that twists Old and New Testament prophecies to suit their own agendas. According to Jesus, no one knows the hour or the day. As followers of Jesus, we instead focus on living and serving as if Jesus is coming back at any moment.

Then Jesus says, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven."

Basically, as human beings, we lack security. We convince ourselves in a number of ways that we have security. We save and invest money for the future, but all could be wiped away in moments. We build structures that are earthquake-proof or flood-proof, but there are no guarantees. We fortify ourselves with strong militaries, but we remain vulnerable to attack. We chase security but can never have it. It is fleeting. All is fleeting—except for the One thing.

The Kairos Moment

It sounds bleak. Jesus is painting a dark landscape. This is how it becomes natural for some to look at current events and conclude we must be at the end. But then there's more. Jesus says to his disciples:

"Before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name."

And then comes the moment. A moment when it all gets put on the line. A moment when you are on the hot seat. And as Jesus says it,

"This will give you an opportunity to testify."

The moment we are called to witness to our faith in Jesus Christ. Will we be ready? Can we even get ready? Jesus says,

“Make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.”

The moment will arrive. The kairos moment. The moment will arrive that even as you sit in the hot seat you will shine like a perfectly cut diamond, and reflect the reality of Jesus Christ in your life. The good news is that God is shaping us for moments of witness, and when they come God will not leave us, but will be there in the moment, giving us, through the Spirit, the wisdom and the words to speak the truth. When the truth comes it is undeniable.

Witness!

This is our life as believers. We are called to witness. To give evidence of the truth. And as proclaimed in the induction of our new members today, our witness is one way we uphold the Church, not just the United Methodist Church, but the whole Church—the body of Christ.

Moments of witness come when we least expect them; the moments that catch us by surprise. You cannot prepare words for those times—Jesus advises against that anyway. God is preparing us for those moments to deliver the truth of Jesus regardless of circumstance. But our witness goes beyond just when we are on the hot seat. Our witness is always being expressed in the day-to-day living of our lives. Others are waiting on our witness; they may very well be depending on our witness to restore some hope in their lives. How effective is your witness in light of what is happening in our world? Regardless of how you voted, is your witness bringing healing in the wake of last week’s elections? Have you been that hot seat yet? An authentic Christian witness is costly. Jesus said,

“You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

Sanctifying grace from God purifies, perfects and shines us up. This is the ongoing process in our spiritual journey—being perfected in the love of God. This happens through spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, spiritual contemplation, worship, and also through service to others in the name of Jesus, feeding the hungry, comforting the grieving, healing the sick. Through all of this our enduring witness is the expression of our lives in loving God and loving neighbor.

Because love remains. When all else falls away, when every political leader is gone, when the last warring tank finally runs out of gas, and every mighty structure crumbles and disintegrates into the ground, when we see in the end that all is temporary, there will be only one thing that remains: God’s Word; the *logos*; the one known as Jesus the Christ; the one whose very existence means love. Love remains. *This is our witness. Amen.*