

STEWARDS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 65:17-255

Isaiah 12

II Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

I participated once in a weekend retreat at the end of which the participants were ushered into chairs on the floor of a gymnasium. As we made our way in, we discovered, seated in the bleachers, members of our families and people, who had sponsored us for the retreat, gathered to celebrate with us the experience we had just concluded. The retreat leaders invited us to speak about what that experience had meant to us. I use the verb “invite” loosely, because it was not so much an invitation as an expectation. We were expected to give our testimony. In some church traditions, it is a practice for members to give personal testimonies in worship or in Sunday school, in which they share their personal stories of repentance and transformation. You may have noticed that I am a Presbyterian, and that practice is not generally part of our tradition. We tend to be more reserved, more heady, more intellectual in our expressions of faith, more likely to volunteer at the homeless shelter than speak of our faith. So, I sat there, squirming, while others bubbled over with wonder at the weekend’s experience, I felt that I had stumbled into the wrong room. Finally, after every single participant had spoken, one of the leaders called me out and asked if I wanted to say something. As politely as I could, I declined and breathed a sigh of relief when I finally walked out the door.

I recalled that experience when I read Jesus’ words that we just heard. “They will arrest you,” he says, “hunt you down, and drag you to court and jail. It will go from bad to worse, dog-eat-dog, everyone at your throat because you carry my name. You’ll end up on the witness stand, called to testify.”ⁱ Now, my experience surely was not as dangerous or horrific as Jesus’ description of what his disciples would face. It only felt that way at the time, but reading Jesus’ words I wonder now if I had missed an opportunity. In the version I read earlier, that is how it is put, “This will give you an opportunity to testify.”

I never thought these words dealing with persecution and threat because of faith really applied to me and my situation. Perhaps that is true for you, too. We are fortunate to live in a country that espouses freedom of religion, especially as that applies to us Christians. My Jewish and Muslim colleagues and friends might feel less free, less safe to practice or speak of their faith, but it never occurred to me that I might be threatened for confessing Christ as my Savior. So I have always rushed by texts like this, even though I have heard the stories of Christians from other places for whom such circumstances are real.

But now I wonder. Teachers are being told what they can and cannot say in classrooms. Physicians are being told what they can and cannot say to their patients. Librarians are being told what they can and cannot have on their shelves. A poll, which is now five years old, found that half of Protestant churchgoers under the age of 50 prefer to go to church with people who share their political views.ⁱⁱ Given the increased polarization of our society, that percentage is now probably higher. That means that churches, like the rest of our society, are increasingly factious, so that folks with differing views may to be told, either subtly or overtly, what they can and cannot say, even in church.

So maybe Jesus does have something to say to us. Are we being given an opportunity to testify? To begin, we have to consider what is meant by testimony. I believe testimony is the telling of our own story of faith. We all have one or we wouldn't be here. We may be tempted to think that our story isn't very dramatic, isn't likely to interest someone else or is just plain ordinary. Over the years as a pastor, I sat in on dozens of new member classes in which folks were asked to tell about their experience of the church as teenagers. It was a safe question because it is about the past, but so often the answers were dynamic, filled with accounts of participating in a mission trip or having known an inspirational youth group leader or discovering that the church was a safe and welcoming place at a time when they felt like an outsider. It was interesting to hear stories even from people who did not participate in church as adolescents, but who knew someone who did and how that relationship impacted them. Often the stories were about everyday things that made a difference and, often, it was only in the telling that the storyteller discovered that God had been at work in his or her life. Our stories can testify to the often subtle or sometimes miraculous workings of God's grace.

The Church of the Redeemer in New Haven is a Congregational church. Those folks are first cousins to us Presbyterians and as unlikely to give personal testimonies as we are. But on a whim one Lent, that church asked some members to tell their faith stories during worship. It was intended to be a one-time thing, just for Lent and they didn't call them testimonies because the word carried too much baggage. Lenten reflections they were named, but testimonies they were, stories of God's power and presence in people's lives. After six weeks to hearing just a few stories, they discovered how powerful it was and decided to continue, not every Sunday, but often and regularly. They discovered that those stories were narratives of God at work, sometimes they were a potent form of truth telling and sometimes they gave listeners a renewed sense of hope and all together, they created a deeper sense of community. Diana Butler Bass, an author and commentator on religion, visited the congregation and writes that those folks had learned to talk about their faith and had gained a rare awareness of God's presence in the mundane. "They asked about my story," she says, "and invited me into theirs."ⁱⁱⁱ

I wonder if we might not have an opportunity before us to testify. The recent elections have shown how deeply divided we are as a nation. Even on a local level, the disputes have grown angrier and the sides more distanced. There is a growing edginess and mistrust that is driving us into pods of the like-minded, only reinforcing our sense of separation and mistrust. What might people of faith bring to such a situation?

First, we bring the faith that has held us in the past. Those mundane experiences and those miraculous moments when we have known God's grace are life-giving in times when the world seems to be falling apart. We tell our stories of faith to remind ourselves and reclaim who God is and what God has done in the past. And in so doing, we may also remind others of their own faith. It is not our job to make someone else believe. It is our job to believe and to trust that our believing may open the door to God for someone.

Second, giving our testimony can be a powerful form of truth telling in the present. We can bear witness to the power of love in the face of division and rage. When politicians and others use the name of Jesus to support hostility and hatred, we who experience his grace as generous, encompassing, and welcoming to all, can share that knowledge. And we are promised to have the words to use when we stand for love and justice, humility and peace.

Third, we have been given abundant clues about the future that is God's intent. Isaiah described that future of God's peaceable kingdom, not as streets made of gold or angels playing harps, but of ordinary people living ordinary lives in peace. Jesus' resurrection is the seal on God's promise of that new world that God is even now creating. We are resurrection people and we carry that promise into our relationships and into our world. We anticipate and believe that God will act in God's good time and according to God's good judgment. That allows us both to speak and to work on behalf of that future, while trusting the future to God.

My friends, we have been given the gift of Christ in our lives. Like the other gifts we have been given—talents, wealth, community, family—we are called to be stewards of that gift. That is, to share it, to use it wisely and gratefully, and to trust ourselves to God's care. Speaking out does not need to be confrontational or dramatic. It can be quiet and practical, but nonetheless insistent. Our silence only colludes with the forces in the world that would hurt, divide and destroy and keep things as they are. We are called to share in Jesus' mission and we do so by remembering God's work in our past, acting in the present and anticipating God's future. We are stewards of the Word. We are called to tell others what we have seen and heard, to see and name God at work in the everyday and ordinary joys and sorrows of our lives. We have been given Christ, and the Spirit gives us the words we need to testify to his presence and holy love in our lives and in the world.

ⁱ Luke 21:12-13, *The Message*.

ⁱⁱ Cited by Adam Russell Taylor, "Being Apolitical Won't Heal Polarized Churches," October 27, 2022, <https://sojo.net/articles/being-apolitical-wont-heal-polarized-churches>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lillian Daniel, *Tell It Like It Is*, (Lanham, MD: Alban Institute, 2006), p. x.