



Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

November 15, 2009

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The year is 1944, and the scene is a Gestapo prison in Berlin. You hear air raid sirens and shells crashing outside. Inside, prisoners are beating on locked doors and screaming to be taken to safe bunkers. There is another sound in those cells. It is the sound of a handful of prisoners saying the Lord's Prayer. One voice, one strong voice leads them. It is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a leader of the church in Germany, a highly respected theologian at Berlin University and a scholar of great renown. He gave up everything – his position, his family – when he stood before the Gestapo and said, "I am a Christian and I defy everything that you stand for."

Ever since 1933 when Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer's friends and colleagues tried to persuade him to leave Germany. They arranged safe places where he might continue teaching and writing. He came to the United States in June of 1939, tempted to stay here. But Bonhoeffer knew God needed his testimony at home. He wrote to his friend, Reinhold Niebuhr, "I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people..."

He returned to Berlin to proclaim the Gospel in the midst of the turmoil of the war. He was imprisoned. His testimony among his fellow prisoners was so persuasive that even the Gestapo's guards were awed by Bonhoeffer. They successfully smuggled his writings out of those dark cells. He stayed among his people, testifying to the power of our Lord Jesus Christ right up to his execution at Flossenberg in April, 1945.

This morning I want to speak with you about the power of testimony. Listen to Jesus' words found in the Gospel of Mark: "...do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you

who speak, but the Holy Spirit.” Testimony is telling others how God is working in your life. It comes directly from experience and from the heart. Testimony is particularly important in times of trial and turmoil.

This morning’s Gospel passage predicts a time of turmoil and suffering, when Christians are fleeing to the mountains, and false messiahs and false prophets are appearing. At the beginning of Chapter 13, Mark’s Gospel describes Jesus standing with his disciples near the temple in Jerusalem as his disciples marvel at the size of the buildings and the massive stones used to construct them. Jesus tells them all this will be thrown down, not one stone will be left unturned. His disciples ask when this will take place, and Jesus describes a time of tribulation, false teachers, wars, earthquakes and famines. He tells his disciples they will be handed over to councils, beaten, brought to trial, and many will turn against each other.

The Gospel of Mark was written in approximately 70 A.D., at the same time when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by Roman armies. The siege lasted five months. Thousands died of starvation. The city was laid waste and the Temple demolished. Jews and Christians fled the city seeking safety. As Christians looked back upon that time of turmoil and destruction, they saw it as the end of the old age and the beginning of a new one.

Mark’s Gospel says that these things - wars, earthquakes, famines, false teachers - are not signs of the end. They are *birth pangs*. During this great transition, Jesus encourages his disciples to be alert and proclaim the Good News! He says, “When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.”

My imagination was stirred when I read the words *birth pangs*. It reminds me of Paul’s words to the Christians at Rome: “...the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now...” I think we have been experiencing birth pangs for the past several decades. We are witnessing old things passing away and still wondering what is emerging from the chaos. The author and teacher, Phyllis Tickle, writes about the transition we are experiencing and believes a similar transition has occurred every 500 years throughout history. Beginning with a huge transition at the time of Jesus, she looks 500 years later and arrives at the time of Gregory the Great. Looking 500 years later, she sees the Great Schism between East and West (1054 A.D.). 500 years later is the Great Reformation. And 500 years later – right now – she calls the *Great Emergence*. We are still experiencing a gigantic shift in human history.

How are Christians to respond during his time of transition and turmoil? The Gospel reminds us of the importance of testimony. Testimony gives voice to the faith that is in us. I hear testimony in our St. John’s community. Parishioners who

experience healing after illness or surgery often express heartfelt testimony, thanking God for their recovery and renewal. I hear testimony among our faithful parishioners who visit prisoners through the Kairos program. Not only do they share their own testimony, but they hear how God is working in the lives of those they visit.

Let us be alert and proclaim the Good News! Let us be a bright light to those who are seeking God in these days of transition.