

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, April 19, 2015

Acts 3:12-19

When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, 'You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

'And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out,

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Luke 24:36b-48

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you — that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.'

Let us pray....Amen.

Christians around the world will refer to themselves as 'Easter People'. In doing so, they acknowledge just how important the Christ's resurrection is to our faith, and to our faith practices. We don't call ourselves 'Christmas People', or 'Palm Sunday' People, though some of our brothers and sister refer to themselves as 'Pentecostal' People.

Culturally, Christmas is a bigger deal. Financially, Christmas is a bigger deal. Spiritually, Easter is really the bigger deal. The birth of Jesus is important, in that Jesus needed to be born in order to have a ministry, in order to heal and forgive people, in order to suffer, and rise from the dead on the third day. But at the core of our Easter Faith is the idea that those who follow Jesus will proclaim repentance and forgiveness in his name to all nations.

But here's the thing: some, but not many, do an ok job with proclaiming forgiveness in their faith lives, and rarely do any proclaim repentance in his name. Oh, we love being forgiven, we love that we get second chances, and third chances, and 70 times 7 chances for forgiveness, but when we get down to heart of it all, it's the rare faithful follower of Jesus who will speak to another about repentance. And when they do, they are labeled nuts, or part of a cult, or ridiculed, or ignored, or worse.

Our Gospel lesson this morning details the time that Jesus came to be among the disciples. They were just talking about him on the road to Emmaus, how their hearts burned when he taught them the scriptures. And then he was there, saying 'Peace be with you'.

In this passage, he seemed intent to prove he is not a ghost, not some wispy remnant of Jesus, but a solid, pierced and injured body, one that can eat a piece of fish. He opened their minds to the scriptures, and called them 'witnesses'.

Which is a very interesting thing to call the disciples. And us. Because even as we read or hear this scripture, we, too, become witnesses to the Easter miracle. We, too, become instruments in the faith practice of proclaiming repentance and forgiveness to the nations in his name. We, too, are meant to testify to these things.

What? Who said anything about testifying? Well, that's what witnesses do, isn't it? Don't they retell what they saw, with the promise that they are telling the truth? Don't we rely on witnesses to help us understand things that we ourselves did not see?

Sometime in the middle to late 20th century, from around the '70's or '80's, certain denominations caught fire on this whole witnessing thing. Devout Christians were on fire to tell as many people about their faith, about Jesus, about repentance and forgiveness as possible. Do you remember when people would come up to you in public, or come to your home and ask you if you knew about Jesus?

Now, maybe our Mormon sisters and brothers have always done this. But the Pentecostal faith that came of age and strength in the 1920's in California really started to make an impact on proclaiming things to the nation, in Jesus' name.

The black church, that grew out of the South, began to expand. Shouts of 'Testify!' could be heard when the preacher or speaker got really fired up.

The Evangelical and Pentecostal branches of Christianity seemed to grasp the need for witnesses, they seemed to understand that the Gospel wasn't just saying be repentant, or be forgiven because of the Christ's sacrifice, the Gospel was saying that *we are witnesses to these things, and that we must testify, we must proclaim to the nations in Jesus's name repentance and forgiveness*. And they were unapologetic in their efforts to go around proclaiming.

For those who grew up in New England, in the Congregational tradition, this was a very strange way to practice faith. So much emotion, so much power, so much shouting!

On one of our Work Camp experiences, my Youth Group from North Haven Congregational Church went to Biloxi Mississippi, where we helped repair homes, do basic yard work, and generally assist those who struggled in poverty. One of the families we helped invited us to their Wednesday Night worship. And that worship rocked! Gospel music, testimony from people who had found a way to repentance and forgiveness, and a sermon that went more than 2 and a half hours!

As a teenager, I like the power and the intensity of the music and the preaching, but the length was really not to my liking!

As the worship service progressed, I noticed a rhythm, a cycle: scripture would be read, we'd sing a song, and someone would be moved to testify. When the testimony was over, the preacher would say something supportive, and more scripture would be read. The longer the service went, the more intense the readings, the more intense the testimony.

It was clearly not anything I had experienced before, and it was a bit overwhelming. The worship I knew was quiet, and only the minister spoke, except if a layperson was reading the scriptures. Our hymns were calm, even the joyful ones were sung with some restraint.

It was a revelation for me to visit a church where everybody was black, and I and my youth group were white. We were welcomed warmly, and encouraged to stand and clap and shout, all the things we didn't do at home. The testimonies were similar to each other: a person made a mistake, they found a way to repent, they were rewarded with forgiveness, and it seemed so personal, more real than just some concept in the bible.

The preacher wove the testimonies into the sermon, the hymns were joyful gifts of thanksgiving, and that night I realized that there were different ways to worship, different traditions that accomplished different things. Part of me felt sad for my church, because we would never be able to express such intense joy in worship.

Part of me feels bad for my church now, because we don't really have a tradition of sharing testimony, of having actual people get up and tell actual stories of how they triumphed over difficult times with the help of the Lord. How they found the strength to repent, and how that repentance led to forgiveness, and how those gifts led them to want to witness, to testify to the truth.

But just because we don't have that tradition, and just because few of us feel comfortable in sharing our personal spiritual experiences of repentance and forgiveness doesn't mean we don't have them!

So while I'm not going to make any of us get up and testify to the truth about repentance and forgiveness in our lives today, or any other day when we worship, I *am* going to ask each of you to reflect on your faith lives, and reflect on when you felt moved to repent, and reflect on whether you felt forgiven. And, if you can identify a time when that happened, maybe someday you'll feel comfortable sharing it with another person.

Not the church, not knocking on someone's door, but someone besides yourself, someone who might benefit from the gift of a story about repentance and forgiveness. We *are* called to testify as witnesses. It's just that it is not our tradition, or our custom to do so...and now that we know that all Christians are called to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to the nations, I hope that we can think a little differently about those who

are comfortable with knocking on doors, or approaching others in public. You don't have to listen, or engage, but I hope you will not judge: they are acting on their sincere belief that Jesus calls them to testify about the truth in their lives. And part of the truth is that *we are too*.

We just haven't found a way to be comfortable doing so.

That summer was the summer after my senior year in high school. I left for college a few weeks after coming home from that work camp experience. That worship service helped me see the world differently. Later on, when in the midst of other types of worship, like the Hindu weddings and shrine experiences, I was able to put them in perspective. Or the Eastern Orthodox worship service I attended in the south of India, equally long services, long sermons...and faithful people trying to live out their faith. In the mosques, in the reciting of the Qu'ran, during the Imam's sermons, I felt that same kind of energy.

In some way or another, a person of faith, no matter what kind of faith they practice, has a testimony to give, a truth to tell about their faith, and their faith practice. So do we.

'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

We are Easter People, called to find ways to live and share the Easter message of repentance and forgiveness of sins.

And it starts with being able to reflect on our own experiences. I'll reflect some more on mine, and I hope you'll spend some time reflecting on yours. And maybe, someday, we'll find that we can share them with others. Jesus expects that we will. Amen.