

## Faithful Witness

Have you ever considered the meaning of the word “witness”? Although we use it frequently in worship and church related activities, the meaning we most commonly associate with it has more to do with court room procedures or maybe television or movie dramas. The dictionary defines it as an attesting of a fact, of giving evidence or testimony. How often do we think of our statements about Jesus, about the resurrection, about God’s grace in that manner...as statements about a fact that we know? The Greek word for witness came to have a different meaning in our traditions...the Greek word for witness is martyr. Probably because many of those who testified and affirmed their belief in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth were persecuted and put to death for the claim. Now the word is more generally used for anyone who gives us something...maybe a cause, maybe a self-proclaimed need and unlike those to whom it first applied, it does not always mean death or even great suffering. Time passes and the association of certain words with certain things can change as perspectives on them change. In all of the scriptures before us this morning the theme of witness is clear. We often fail to appreciate the Book of Revelation—it Greek name The Apocalypse to John—is another instance where our understanding of a word’s meaning has changed since it was used by John. The Greeks understood “apocalypse” to refer to an unveiling or revealing of something—not to some cataclysmic event. So when we begin with our verses from Revelation’s opening, we should take note that the greeting John gives is to the seven churches of his time. This letter is a communication from a leader of the church to the churches under his care—a pastoral letter. It begins with a salutation—a greeting to those he was concerned about. “John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” While this language does not resonate with the postmodern language of our times, the letter was written to all believing Christians at the time—seven symbolically representing the total. Within this letter, John is offering assurance to his audience that their peace is not found in the language of the Empire—any Empire, but specifically for his folks the Roman Empire’s Pax Roma. Instead their peace and ours lies in Pax Dei, the peace of God. His goal is to persuade Christ believers in Asia Minor and those around the world to avoid devotion to any cosmic imperial powers save that of the raised Jesus Christ, who is enthroned at the right hand of God. In the context of Revelation, the result of God’s grace is peace whereby the walls of hostility are broken and

worshippers see themselves as belonging to a new world view ruled by God, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In an oppressed and hostile situation, peace is the presence and wholeness found in God who will usher in the messianic world of justice and reconciliation. John's descriptions of God reflect the name given to Moses: the one of I AM which proclaimed God's sovereignty, the one who was, who is and always will be. There are the other familiar descriptions of God and Christ, including the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Although Paul's writings will often refer to the resurrection and Jesus as being the first born of the dead as John does here, John also describes Christ as the faithful witness. John, in writing to his people, also becomes a "faithful witness". He witnesses to all what God has done in Jesus Christ, his witness has landed him on the small island of Patmos, separated from this congregation of believers. His entire life is a witness; he testifies to the truth of what has really happened, the truth of the gospel news. He takes a stand against the lies, falsehood and evils of the Empire. John's testimony is that above all God is in absolute control of all things and this same God has the first and final word in creation. In his description of Jesus as the faithful witness, it is that word martyr that is used. Jesus is the faithful one who has given his witness all the way to death. But Jesus was also resurrected, so he is the firstborn of or from the dead. To the early Christians, that Jesus was the martyr above all martyrs, the one who was faithful and now was the firstborn, the first one resurrected meant there would be others. That it was this Jesus they were following was extremely important and encouraging. That this Jesus was now the "ruler of the kings of earth" meant that ultimately his rule would be over those who claim to be earth's ruler—like the Emperor of Rome. Jesus will return and John's flock should focus on that—and avoid the temptation to believe in the world's view—to accept the lies and falsehoods of the world that claimed their ways were the ones to be followed. Revelation in its entirety presents a battle between God and the values of the world—the images are foreign to us—but they are not meant to be "prophetic" in the sense of predicting events. They are meant to proclaim that God's reign will be the one victorious. The world may claim absolute power, but it will not be able to endure. God is the Almighty—the All-Powerful One. This is the title claimed by the emperor as is the title of Lord and God, but that claim is a lie. So even when the symbolism of Revelation baffles us, we need to keep in mind that John wrote not a psychic but as a prophet, as a pastoral theologian expressing his concern for these burgeoning communities; his concern about the ways they were living, ways that should set them apart from the world around them and its values. Perhaps we should look around and see if

we are still recognizable by our Christ-like ways or if we blend very well with the ways of this world. Perhaps John was worried that these folks would blend in too well with the culture around them. He writes to encourage them to be faithful, to remain faithful and not accommodate to the ways of the Empire. He wanted those who had given in to the ways of the world to repent and become a part of the movement toward the new creation God was creating through Jesus' life and ministry. These truths of the text and John's concern is one that applies to us—disregard the symbols and look at how much of our witness is to Jesus teachings by our ways of living and treating others versus how often we buy into the divisiveness that the world presents to us as the way to be safe, to get ahead, to provide for our needs. The text is about seeing the work of God in the seemingly ordinary, unremarkable moments that fill our lives...moments fueled by love and kindness. How often do we witness through our actions. Our passage from Acts works well with this theme of being witnesses. Peter and the disciples, after Pentecost, go out and proclaim the news of the resurrection. They proclaim the gospel message about what they have witnessed in the life and ministry of Jesus, of the resurrection hope and grace given to those who repent and seek forgiveness. In the text for today, this is not the first time they have been arrested. They have been previously beaten and jailed and forbidden to teach in Christ's name. In this appearance before the council after their defiance they tell the council they have no choice: "We must obey God rather than any human authority." They repeat the news of Jesus' resurrection and exalted status of sitting at God's right hand as 'Leader and Savior' who would give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins." The Apostles then add, "And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit who God has given to those who obey him." The Apostles refused to be intimidated now. They knew without a doubt that they were called to testify to what they knew—they were called to be witnesses to God's presence in the world, God's act of intervening into history to bring grace and reconciliation to the world. The message they proclaimed of Christ's lordship was not going to be well received by those in power. The very defining element of Jesus' lordship and thus the economy of his kingdom is one of overturning earthly power and dominance; the breaking down of barriers and the establishment of a new order of being. A world order which would not submit to the power hungry modes of existence that typified the world; Jesus' resurrection says there is something better. The Apostles feel they are commissioned to bring this new and better way into being. The gospel message certainly does challenge and demolish powers of oppression, but it is always a word and an act of mercy.

Peter does not preach vengeance but the gospel story of God's mercy and action to bring repentance and forgiveness to Israel. This passage from Acts also reveals the unsurprisingly constant story of human fear and self-protection even if it costs others everything. Again, the way and claims of the world meet the message of love and mercy found in the gospel. We claim like Peter, that we must witness to God's work, but in our context as well there are countless settings in which political and military powers demand our allegiance. And we must wrestle with how to serve our neighbors without becoming a tool of the powers of this world—powers of any flavor whether political, social, economic, or religious. The Apostles were not only telling of the good news, they were establishing a community where all were cared for, they were promoting an alternative world view—an ethos of sharing possessions and caring for those in the community. This was in direct contrast to the Roman Empire which fostered an ethos of hoarding and acquiring wealth at the expense of the poorest. As we turn to look at the "ethos" of our world, to which way do we witness in what we say and do? Our third reading was from John's gospel and records the actions of the disciples on the evening of "that day". That day being the one which has seen the discovery of the empty tomb; the one in which they had received the testimony of those who discovered it empty that Jesus had risen. Testimony of witnesses they discounted. Now Jesus comes to them while they are in a locked room. He comes with the greeting shalom-peace and wholeness to you. The ten who are there are fearful, but then rejoice. The missing disciple, Thomas returns to be told of Jesus' visit. He then refuses to believe...saying he will not believe until...and what he asks for is only what the others have received. A week later, when all eleven are together, Jesus appears to them again in that locked room. Jesus gives Thomas what he has asked for, the opportunity to touch his hands and side. Thomas responds, not by touching Jesus but by responding "My Lord and my God." The writer of John then through Jesus' words addresses our situation...our situation as the ones who have not seen, but have come to believe. The writer then adds that he knows of many other signs that Jesus did among them. He is recording these so that "you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." And this is the crux of the matter—for some two thousand years witnesses have testified to the truth of the gospel. As those called and claimed into the body of Christ, we understand that we have also been called to be witnesses. The question becomes how to we fulfill this commission to witness—to testify to the good news if our words and actions fail to match the ways of

God's reign which Jesus proclaimed near. If those around us cannot see how we live into the resurrection news and call upon our way of life, how can our witness stand? The commentator Elizabeth Schussier Florenza makes this observation. Revelation was not written to predict our time or represent our world. When we try to do that we miss the whole point of the book. She says when we try to do that something strange happens. When the text is appropriated by readers in a comfortable, powerful, majority community it becomes a gold mine for paranoid fantasies. John wrote to those he loved and for whom he was concerned. John meant to reveal—to unmask—what lay beneath the surface in the actions of both God and the world represented by the Roman Empire. John's purpose was to reveal God as sovereign and to illuminate the faithful witness of Jesus—and call all his readers to be faithful witnesses to God's power and ways. The call upon us through all of scripture is to live according to the ways of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed near. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.