



Lexington Presbyterian Church

Faith • Fellowship • Service • Since 1789

Witness

Mark 1:4-8 & 1 Peter 3:15b-16
A sermon by William M. Klein

27 November 2016

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mk. 1:4-8 NRSV)

15...Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; 16 yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Pet. 3:15b-16 NRSV)

1

The writer of 1 Peter tells us that as Christians we must "always be ready to make a defense to anyone who demands an accounting for the hope that is in us..."

If I pointed to you and said, "Ok, stand up and make an accounting for your faith," what would you do? Not to worry; I would not do that. But if I did...how would you respond?

People deal with me according to all sorts of presuppositions. I am a pastor...and pastors don't have any doubts...pastors have every faith question settled, locked-up tight...right? People assume I have some secret hot-line to God. Too often they deal with me a little like the TV Westerns where the young gunslinger rides into town and wants to take on the old gunfighter. The preacher is supposed to give an accounting for his faith - to field all their faith questions and give water-tight, convincing answers.

I like opportunities to talk about my faith - and I do my best...but I know I fall short. I also know my faith is not water-tight. I wish I could be more articulate about the faith that helps make sense of my life, convinces me God loves me and you, and the fills me with hope.

It may be that folks look to you as a representative Christian. After all, you "give up" your Sunday mornings to attend a church school class and worship. You contribute a portion of your income to support the work of the church. You conduct yourselves in the business and professional world as ambassadors of Christ. You step into the voting booth more interested in being faithful to God than in being faithful to a candidate or an ideology. It may be that you are called upon by your non-Christian or nominally-Christian friends to explain yourselves - to explain to them why in the world you think faith is important. An accounting for the hope that is in you...that is what they want.

There was a time I only understood this injunction one way – i.e., that on a moment's notice I must be ready to tell someone why I place my hope in Christ Jesus. I took this to mean I must be ready to put into words what I believe.

And surely there is a sense in which this understanding holds true. There are times when the stakes are so high that to remain silent is tantamount to joining Peter in denying we know Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemöller, and other German pastors and laypersons reached such a point during the rise of Adolf Hitler and his lock-step followers. Let me refresh your memory. In July of 1933, many German Christians wanted a church that was truly German. They got what they wanted, because in church-wide elections that year – aided by the Nazi propaganda machine, many German churches adopted the slogan, "The Swastika on our breast and the Cross in our hearts."¹

Bonhoeffer, Niemöller, and others knew a time for an accounting of their faith was at hand. At great personal risk, they put their faith into words in a document that came to be known as the *Barmen Declaration*. That, along with a number of brazen stands, turned out to be a courageous accounting for their hope that cost Bonhoeffer his life and Niemöller seven years in Dachau.²

At some point before Niemöller was arrested he said something that is truly, truly haunting. He said...

*When the Nazis came to get the Communists, I was silent, because I was not a Communist. When they came to get the Socialists, I was silent. When they came to get the Catholics, I was silent. When they came to get the Jews, I was silent. And when they came to get me, there was no one left to speak.*³

I am convinced there are times in our lives when we either make an accounting for our faith, come what may...or we effectively deny the gospel. Sometimes the context involves considerable risk. Other times the risk involves only our pride.

2

Always be ready to make an accounting for the hope that is in you. It is worth keeping in mind that any accounting for our faith ought to point to the source of our hope, to God...and not to us.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews recounted the witness of the heroes of the faith. He said these people of faith bet their lives on things hoped for...and turned their dreams into deeds by living faithful lives even though they never saw the fulfillment of their dreams.⁴

Clarence Jordan, a Georgian who wrote the *Cotton Patch Version of the Gospels*, also translated Hebrews. He rendered the first verse of chapter 11 as follows: "Now faith is the turning of dreams into deeds; it is betting your life on the unseen realities."⁵

The writer of Hebrews listed Old Testament people his readers would immediately recognize as people of faith. He lifted up their example and encouraged his readers to be inspired by their witness. He wanted them and us to realize that just as these mothers and fathers of the faith in one way or another turned their dreams into deeds and bet their lives on unseen realities – so can we.

I think he was right. I know that in my own life the witness of the saints has helped my faith grow. I gain courage and confidence to be a person of bolder faith as I read about these biblical characters...but also as I think about people like Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, George MacDonald, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemöller, Gandhi, Dorothy Day, George MacLeod, G. K. Chesterton, Martin Luther King, Howard Thurman, Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa, Jean Vanier, Wendell Berry...plus plenty of people I have known personally. I know full well I stand on their shoulders.

The writer of Hebrews didn't just point to Old Testament people, though, did he? He pointed to a New Testament witness, too. Like John the Baptist, he pointed beyond himself to Jesus. He called Jesus "the pioneer and perfecter" of faith. He told his readers that as they went about their daily lives, they would be strengthened by looking to Jesus. As they ran the race of life their faith would be quickened by keeping their eye on Jesus.

3

Always be ready to make an accounting for the hope that is in you. As I said earlier, there was a time I only understood this injunction one way - i.e., that on a moment's notice you and I must be ready to put into words what we believe. While that remains my understanding...I now understand "a defense of the faith" must be more than words. Words are powerful...but words alone may not be powerful enough. A defense of the faith might take a number of forms. There is a sense in which a proper faith defense has just as much to do with **the way we look at the world, how we interpret what we see, and how we live.**

How do you look at the world around you? Do you look for and expect the best from others...or do you expect very little and so see very little? Do you look at others and say, "there is a person loved by God, a person for whom Christ died," and then treat her as a sister? Or do you look at others and say, "Could God really love that person," and then treat him as if he were outside of God's love?

You and I see what we expect to see. We can train ourselves to see what we want to see. We can discipline ourselves to look for God's goodness in everyone we meet. We can also discipline ourselves to look for, expect, and therefore see flaws. Which seems the better witness as followers of Christ?

The fact of the matter is that "our actions speak louder than words." You and I have known people who could "talk the talk"...but, for whatever reason, did not "walk the walk." Speaking to the people of Israel, the prophet Amos put it this way - again citing the *Message* translation:

*I can't stand your religious meetings. I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions. I want nothing to do with your religion projects, your pretentious slogans and goals. I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes, your public relations and image making. I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music. When was the last time you sang to me? Do you know what I want? I want justice - oceans of it. I want fairness - rivers of it. That's what I want. That's all I want.*⁶

Did the people in Amos' day just not see what he was talking about? Had they ignored the sacred teachings of their ancestors? Didn't they know worship of God was as much about doing justice as it was about the words they spoke at formal Sabbath worship?

3

I thought about these words from Amos when I came across something Helen Keller wrote 80 years ago. In case some of you are not familiar with Helen Keller... she was born deaf and blind. Because of the labors of a remarkable teacher named Anne Sullivan, Keller learned to read, write, and speak. She graduated from college in 1904 and lectured widely on behalf of sightless people.⁷

Helen Keller was a perfect person to challenge sighted people to use their eyes to see. You see, from what she could tell, the seeing saw little. She wrote:

I have often thought it would be a blessing if all human beings were stricken blind and deaf for a few days at some time during their early adult life. Darkness would make them more appreciative of sight; silence would teach them the joy of sound.

Keller went on to offer the following example...

*Now and then I have tested my seeing friends to discover what they see. Recently I was visited by a very good friend who had just returned from a long walk in the woods, and I asked her what she had observed. 'Nothing in particular,' she replied. I might have been incredulous had I not been accustomed to such responses, for long ago I became convinced that **the seeing see little**.*⁸

How, we might wonder, can those who do not see what there is to see make a convincing defense of the hope within them? Surely a proper faith defense has to do with how our hope in Christ affects the way we look at the world, how we interpret what we see, and how we live.

4

Biblical scholar and a friend of this church, Frances Taylor Gench, writes: "Faith empowers risky and vigorous living in this world. Faith empowers us to step into the unknown with courage, to invest ourselves at those points where God's future may be struggling toward realization now, confident God's redemptive purpose in the world will not fail to be achieved despite all appearances to the contrary."⁹

This, my friends, is the witness of the church. This is the high calling Christ Jesus issues to us...that we let God's love become so much a part of who we are that we see the power of God at work everywhere – in the classroom and the sorority house, in County Commissioner's meetings, in the halls of power, in conversations in the Coop, in book clubs, in passionate business meetings, on the steps of the church, and in our own homes.

We become God's faithful witnesses when our thoughts, words, and deeds reveal to everyone around us that the hope in us has been shaped by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Lexington Presbyterian Church
120 South Main Street
Lexington, Virginia 24450
www.lexpres.org

Endnotes:

¹ Craig, Mary. 1984. Six Modern Martyrs. NY: Crossroad Pub., 23.

² Neither were punished simply for their part in writing the *Barmen Declaration*. Bonhoeffer was involved in a plan to assassinate Hitler. Niemöller refused to be quiet from the pulpit or in his daily life about the evils of Hitler and the Nazis.

³ Ellsberg, Robert. 1999. *All Saints*. NY: Crossroad Pub. Co., 29.

⁴ See Hebrews 11:1.

⁵ Davis, Murphy. 2007. "Turning Dreams into Deeds," from www.sojo.net for Proper 15, Year C. Sojourners 42401 15th Street NW Washington DC 20009.

⁶ Peterson, 1652 of Amos 5:21-24.

⁷ From the *American Heritage Dictionary*. Forth Edition.

⁸ Marty, Martin E. 2008. *Context*. April issue, Part B. Chicago: Claretian Pub., 3. From Keller's work, "Three Days to See."

⁹ Gench, Francis T. 1996. *Hebrews and James*. *Westminster Bible Companion*. Louisville: WJK Press, 63-64.