

A Hopeful Witness

Over the winter, my friend Pastor Olsen and I began reading a book together written by Diogenes Allen, who was, in his day, something of a legendary professor of theology and philosophy at Princeton Theological Seminary. In his book *Spiritual Theology* he tells the stories of how three major intellectuals from an earlier time came to believe in Jesus Christ—the novelist Leo Tolstoy, the poet T.S. Eliot, and the philosopher Simone Weil. One of his reasons for telling these stories is to point out when their spiritual hunger led them on a journey to God, each of these three had a roadmap for their quest—they each had a connection to some branch of the Christian tradition. They knew the Bible, and the stories and teachings of Jesus, and they had had some exposure to the practices of the Christian life.

In fact, historically, most Christians have traveled by some version of this roadmap on the way to becoming followers of Jesus. That common path has been described by Diana Butler Bass, a scholar who writes about American religion, as a journey from believing to behaving to belonging. In our Presbyterian version of it, after children are baptized in the church they are taught what Christians believe in Sunday school. As they grow older and move up into the “big people’s” church, they learn about how Christians behave – they learn about prayer and worship, they’re invited to the Lord’s table, they

become apprentices in serving in Jesus' name. And the culmination of that journey comes with a confirmation class—often with a final examination of some sort to demonstrate that they know what Christians believe and how we are to practice our faith. And really only at that point are they declared to fully belong to the community of faith. And if one wanders off for a few years or a few decades he or she knows the roadmap home.

It should go without saying that, these steps actually overlap quite a bit. And there have always been exceptions, too, including my own story. But in that earlier time, I was still exposed to enough of what Christians believe and how they behave to have some idea of that roadmap--if only by watching "Davey and Goliath" and "A Charlie Brown Christmas" on TV, and observing my friends, almost all of whom went to church somewhere.

The point Diana Bulter Bass makes is that for many in the current generation that roadmap has all but disappeared. She suggests that for them the steps of the journey might need to come in the opposite order, beginning with belonging to a community where they can see how Christians behave, and then they might grow to appreciate how these things all spring up from the well of what Christians believe. All of this is to say our calling to being witnesses to the power of the gospel depends more than ever on a foundation of relationships and community—it's the character of our lives, and our life together, that may provide the starting point for the people around us on their journeys to faith.

And so, in this stretch from Easter to Pentecost, we've been making some observations about Paul's character as it's revealed in his second letter to Corinth. I have a little rubric going—we began with looking at what it means to be a credible witness, followed by a faithful witness, and then a humble witness. Today's focus will be on being a hopeful witness.

Hope can seem like it's in short supply these days. Many things on which people, including many Christians, have set their hopes seem to be evaporating---that each generation will be more prosperous than their parents, that science and technology will solve the world's big problems, world will become more fair and just for all. As those hopes have eroded many of the basic structures of life have eroded with them, beginning with families. Much of the addiction and anger that is endemic in our society is a symptom of a lack of hope. I have to wonder whether the inability of business and government to take a long view of the future might be another symptom of this same lack of hope for a better world to come.

In last week's reading Paul gave a litany of his struggles as an apostle—about being afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, “always carrying in [his] body the death of Jesus.” But as he continues today he reveals what enables him to keep going—the hope of the resurrection. He knows that the current state of affairs in his life isn't permanent. He knows that the trials that come his way are not the end of the story.

And so he launches into another litany –this time it's a litany of contrasts between our present experience and what lies ahead. Our outer nature may be wasting away, but our inner selves are being made new every morning. Our current afflictions are only “slight” and “momentary” compared to the eternal weight of glory that awaits us, a “glory beyond all measure.” What we can see is only temporary, there are eternal realities which we cannot see now but we will see at our journey's end. The earthly tents we live in—our mortal bodies—will not last, but we will be raised like Christ with spiritual bodies that will never wear out.

We know from our own experiences in life that we can endure a certain amount of hardship when we know that it's only temporary, and especially when we believe that it will lead to a good end—childbirth, and root canals, and surgeries, or sacrifices we've made to reach an important goal. Advocates for freedom, and justice, and human rights have been able to persevere without seeing results in their own lifetimes because they have confidence that their causes are just, and hope that in the end righteousness and justice will prevail.

The hope of the resurrection is a deeply personal hope--that allows us to endure and persevere. Paul says “this slight, momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory.” Through the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, God does that work by forming our characters. Using much of the same language, James writes in his letter to the churches, “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you

know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4 NRSV)

The good news we have been given to share is a message of hope. But how do we communicate that hope to those around us who don't share a common framework of belief? Where do we begin in this time when relationship and character are the starting point for the path toward faith? Especially, how can we even begin to speak of resurrection when Christians have often made it sound as if it's only something that matters after we die? Or when it's been used by people with power to coerce those who have no power into accepting the status quo?

Our starting point must be embodying hope and living hope. That sounds nice, but what does it mean? Christian hope is more than just a cheerful optimism. It's the fruit of our own trials and struggles. In another place where Paul writes about this, he actually puts it at the end of a chain, not at the beginning. He writes in the fifth chapter of Romans: "[We]also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5)

We could almost say that hope is something we learn, it is the product of struggle and prayer and sleepless nights of wrestling with doubt and fear—and meeting the risen Christ there. There are no shortcuts.

And when we discover that hope, when we live with the assurance that Paul bears witness to in his own life, then we have a gift to share with those around us. If we allow people to get close enough to us – if we allow people who are not already Christians into our actual lives –hope will show in the way we carry ourselves through our own struggles, even in our admitting that we have struggles and that our hope isn't necessarily automatic and easy.

And when we do that, when the people who are dear to us are beset by struggles of their own, we will be able to do more than just say cheerful words. We will have stories to tell of how like Paul said, of how by the grace of God we have been afflicted but not crushed, how we have been perplexed but not driven to despair, how we have been struck down but not destroyed. Because our hope is in the living God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. And as we bear our hopeful witness, those we share our lives with might just embark on the journey that leads to faith. Amen.

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