

Arden Pastoral Charge

May 2, 2021:

A Story of Witness

Rev. Cheryl McMurray

Jesus said: “When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there.”

Today we gather in Spirit, and Christ is here.



Gathering Prayer:

Holy One, we feel your welcome in this time of worship.

You welcome the young and old, the faithful and the doubters.

You welcome the newcomers and the long-time members.

You welcome the eager early risers and the sitting on the sofa in your pj's;
all seeking to offer praise and prayer, to hear your Word,
and to celebrate your presence among us.

Be with us this day, Holy One,

in our listening, in our speaking, in our doing, in the very fibre of our being.

Amen.

Scripture: Our scripture this morning comes from the book of the Acts of the apostles. We enter mid-story as Peter and John are brought before the authorities for healing a beggar, a person who from birth had been unable to walk, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Reading Acts 4: 5 – 12 from the Inclusive Bible:

When the leaders, the elders and the scribes met the next day in Jerusalem, Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, Jochanan, Alexander and all who were of the high priestly class were there. They brought Peter and John before them and began to interrogate them: "By what power and in whose name have you done this?"

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke up: "Leaders of the people! Elders! If we must answer today for a good deed done to a person who was unable to walk, and explain how this person has been made whole, then you and all the people of Israel must realize that it was done in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead. In the power of that Name, this person stands before you perfectly sound. This Jesus is the 'stone rejected by the builders which has become the cornerstone.' There is no salvation in anyone else, for there is no other name under heaven given to the human race by which we must be saved."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Thoughts Along the Way:

For the past few weeks, we have been reading from the first letter of John to the early Christ communities. John, as well as the other apostle letter writers, speaks to the importance of witness and testimony. You may remember John writing:

'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard and seen with our eyes, and have looked at, and touched with our hands: the Word who is life. That life came to be; we saw it and bear witness to it. What we have seen and heard we declare to you.' (1 John 1: 1-3).

Witness and the declaration of witness – what we might call testimony – hold power. Word of mouth, the relaying and sharing of personal experience, will

always top any ad campaign. ‘Can you recommend a good painter?’ ‘Was that a good book?’ ‘Where do you get your hair cut?’

The bible is filled with stories of witness, but the lectionary often plunks us down in the middle of the story and so we do not hear the fullness and the richness that the witness and testimony offers. Today, our lectionary does just that. Plunks us down in the middle of this heated exchange between Peter and John and the high priests. I decided after reading the whole account, that I would step back from sermon writing today, and let Peter and John bear witness and share their testimony with you.

One day, when Peter and John were going up to the temple for prayer at about three in the afternoon, a person who from birth was unable to walk was being carried in. Every day this individual was brought to the temple gate called ‘The Beautiful,’ to beg from people as they came in.

Seeing Peter and John on their way in, the person being carried begged them for alms. Peter fixed his gaze on the individual, as did John. “Look at us!” Peter said. The beggar looked at them intently, hoping to get something.

Then Peter said, “I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have I give you! In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!”

Peter pulled the beggar up by the right hand. Immediately the beggar’s ankles and feet became strong; they jumped up, stood for a moment, began to walk around, then went into the temple with Peter and John – walking, jumping about, and praising God. When the people saw the beggar walking and giving praise to God, they recognized the one who used to sit and beg at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. They were struck with astonishment - utterly stupefied at what had happened.

As the beggar who had been healed stood clinging to Peter and John, the whole crowd rushed over to them excitedly in Solomon’s Porch. When Peter saw this, he addressed the people: “Why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if we had made this person walk by our own power or holiness? You are

Israelites, and it is the God of Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca and Isaac, Leah and Rachel and Jacob, the God of our ancestors, who has glorified Jesus – the same Jesus you handed over and then disowned in the presence of Pilate, after Pilate had decided to release him. You disowned the Holy and Just One and asked instead for the release of a murderer, Barabbas. You put to death the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead – a fact to which we are witnesses. It is the name of Jesus, and faith in it, that has strengthened the limbs of this one whom you see and know well. Such faith has given this beggar perfect health, as all of you can see.

Yet I know, my sisters and brothers, that you acted out of ignorance, just as your leaders did. God has brought to fulfillment by this means what was announced long ago by the prophets: that the Messiah would suffer. Therefore, reform your lives! Turn to God, that your sins may be wiped away, and that God may send a season of refreshment. Then our God will send you Jesus, the preordained Messiah, whom heaven must keep until the restoration of all things comes, which God promised through the holy prophets in ancient times. Moses, for example, said ‘our God will raise up a prophet like me for you, from among your own kinfolk. You must listen to everything this prophet tells you. Anyone who doesn’t listen is to be cut off ruthlessly from the people.’ In fact, all the prophets who have ever spoken, from Samuel onward, have predicted these days.

You are the heirs of the prophets, the heirs of the Covenant the most High made with our ancestors when God told Sarah and Abraham, ‘In your offspring all the families of the earth will be blessed.’ It was for you that God raised up and sent this Jesus, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.”

While the apostles were still addressing the crowd, the priests, the captain of the Temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, angry because they were teaching the people and proclaiming the resurrection of the dead in the person of Jesus. It was evening by now, so the authorities arrested the apostles and put them in jail for the night. Despite this, many of those who had heard the speech believed – the total number had now risen to something like five thousand.

When the leaders, the elders and the scribes met the next day in Jerusalem, Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, Jochanan, Alexander and all who were of the high priestly class were there. They brought Peter and John before them and began to interrogate them: "By what power and in whose name have you done this?"

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke up: "Leaders of the people! Elders! If we must answer today for a good deed done to a person who was unable to walk, and explain how this person has been made whole, then you and all the people of Israel must realize that it was done in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead. In the power of that Name, this person stands before you perfectly sound. This Jesus is the 'stone rejected by the builders which has become the cornerstone.' There is no salvation in anyone else, for there is no other name under heaven given to the human race by which we must be saved."

The leaders, elders and scribes were amazed as they observed the self-assurance of Peter and John, and they realized that the speakers were uneducated and of no standing. Then they recognized them as having been with Jesus.

When they saw the beggar who had been healed standing with them, they could think of nothing to say, so they ordered them out of the court while they consulted.

"What will we do with these two?" they asked each other. "Everyone who lives in Jerusalem knows what a remarkable show of power took place through them. We can't deny it. To stop this from spreading further among the people, we must give them a stern warning never to mention the Galilean's name to anyone again." So the priests and elders called the apostles back and made it clear that under no circumstances were they to speak the name of Jesus or teach anything about Jesus.

Peter and John answered, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight for us to obey you rather than God. Surely we cannot help speaking of what we have heard and seen."

At that point, they were dismissed with further warnings. The court could find no way to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what they had seen and heard. The person who had been miraculously healed was over forty years old.

After being released, they went back to their own people and told them what the priests and elders had said. On hearing the story, they all raised their voices in prayer to the Most High and said, "O Sovereign God, who made heaven and earth, the seas and all that is in them, you have said by the Holy Spirit through the lips of David, your servant,

'Why this arrogance among the nations, these futile plots among the peoples? Rulers of the earth are setting out to war, and leaders are making alliances against the Most High and against God's Anointed One.'

"This is what has come true: in this very city, Herod and Pontius Pilate made an alliance with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, against your holy child Jesus whom you anointed, but only to bring about the very thing that you in your strength and wisdom had predetermined should happen.

And now, O God, take note of their threats and help your faithful ones to proclaim your message with all boldness: stretch out your hand to heal and to work miracles and marvels through the name of your holy child Jesus." As they prayed, the house where they were assembled was shaken; they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim the word of God boldly. The community of believers was of one mind and one heart; and the apostles continued to testify with great power to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Acts 3: 1 – 4: 31).

May their witness and testimony live in our hearts, and may we offer witness and testimony of our own - to life lived in the presence of our Creator God, to the inspiration and passion passed to us through the Holy Spirit, and to the great power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Holy One, we witness to your Word,
to the stories spoken, then written,
then collected by the faithful centuries ago.

We testify to the stories of our own lives,
when we have been lost and found,
hurt and healed, shunned and welcomed;
when we have felt the power of the Holy Spirit shake us,
the hand of Christ guide us, and your presence comfort us.

We ask now, as your people did then,
that you help your faithful ones to proclaim your message with boldness,
and that you stretch out your hand to heal and to work miracles and marvels
through the name of your holy child, Jesus.

Holy One,

We pray for the needs of all during this time
– for health, for family, for food and shelter, for financial security,
for justice, and for equality.

We pray for wisdom for leaders of nations.

We pray for courage and comfort for medical staff, and for front line and essential
service workers.

We pray for patience as we and our communities struggle with the conditions set
upon us because of COVID-19.

We pray for those who are ill, in body and mind and spirit,
and for loved ones who cannot be close enough to care for or comfort them.

Holy One, we pray for all who have asked for our prayers...

We pray for all who have no one to pray for them...

We pray especially for those near and dear to our hearts.....

“Where hope has grown tired and thin, lift our sights,
so that we may see hope beyond hope, life beyond death,
and you, lifted up before us.

We pray all this in the name of Christ who gave himself for our sake,”¹
To our Mother of Wisdom and our Father...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

We give thanks to God for blessings and gifts given. We, in turn, offer our gifts of time, talent and treasure to God. Your gifts can be sent to June Hughes for Arden United Church, Sheila Deline for Henderson United Church, or Sharon MacMunn for Mountain Grove United Church. You can also visit our website – www.ardenpastoralcharge.ca – where you will find a ‘Donate’ button.

On behalf of the congregations of Arden, Henderson and Mountain Grove, I do want to thank you for your ongoing financial contributions to our churches.

Benediction:

“May our lives be a witness to Christ’s life
So that others may come to believe that the Lord is risen indeed.”²
And now, may the grace of Christ attend you,
the love of God surround you,
and the Holy Spirit keep you. Amen.

¹ Feasting on the Word: Worship Companion, Year A, Vol 1, 103.

² Feasting on the Word: Worship Companion, Year B, Vol 1, 154 (adapted CMM).