

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Reverend David Mesenbring

The Third Sunday in Advent, December 11, 2011

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; I Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Accounting for Faith

The first time Jesus goes home to Nazareth after beginning his ministry, he enters the temple and evidences enough literacy to amaze those who knew him as the carpenters' son. He reads the same portion of Isaiah just read to us: "*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; ...to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives.*" Illustrating that prophets can be hard to hear, Luke records that Jesus' interpretation of this text nearly got him killed! It's been a primary justice text ever since.

This portion of Isaiah was written long after exiles had returned home from Babylonian captivity and reflects a continuing hope that God will yet bring into being the justice that exiles had dreamed of restoring. Faith that "*they shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations, they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations*" had not occurred as hoped. Instead, economic disparities and religious and political factions returned to Jerusalem along with the exiles, causing the author to remind Israel that God 'loves justice and hates robbery and wrongdoing.' How could such faith be maintained amid such unfulfilled expectations?

Today's epistle, First Thessalonians, might be the oldest book of the New Testament canon. Paul writes to the earliest Church which saw its faith tested by how long it was taking Jesus to return. He instructs them how to live in this world while awaiting a better one. "*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; ...Do not quench the Spirit.*" But how can you do that if you're grieving the physical demise of a loved one this morning? How do you "rejoice always" while grieving the tarnished failures of your American Dreams? How do you pray thankfully in circumstances like these?

What darkness threatens to 'quench your spirit' these days? If you can 'pray without ceasing,' is it

thankful for 'all circumstances' or are your prayers more anxious than that? Paul's instructions also include this curious combination of two clauses: "*Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything.*" Teaching at Seattle University recently, one of my objectives was to undermine faith in charitable enterprise. One student pushed back testily when I quoted Garret Keizer who writes in Help that "*feeling good about what you are doing is no guarantee that you are doing any good.*" Was Paul's admonition to 'test everything' a reference to misplaced faith in 'sacred cows?'

The directors of FAN (Faith Action Network) met this week with leaders of our Hunger Offering which has long divided its monthly collection among various feeding programs. This year, they added advocacy (i.e., letter writing and other public witness) to their mission. FAN, a statewide faith-based network of people uniting around public action for justice, cited the true purpose of charity as a momentary alleviation of injustice drawing us deeper into issues until we advocate for public policy changes.

What charitable enterprises claim your highest hopes? How do you know your faith is well placed? What kind of witness is needed to validate that faith? Is it enough for you to hear that our Homeless Advocacy Ministry is sponsoring a community meal tonight or will you witness what happens first hand? Witness value matters. It's like the difference between feeling proud that our Cathedral will host this afternoon's Virgin of Guadalupe service; and sitting in the middle of that Spanish speaking liturgy and crowd. There's a difference between annually hosting Tent City in our parking lot and joining the monthly meeting of the Coalition to End Homelessness in King County. To which end does your faith-in-action give its witness?

The Greek word for 'witness' appears only twice in all three synoptic gospels (i.e., Matthew, Mark,

and Luke). But John's gospel uses it 33 times. Last week's John the Baptist (in Mark) is today's John the Witness: "*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him 'Who are you?'*" The religious leadership in Jerusalem was aware of a wild guy attracting crowds in a location just beyond its jurisdiction. He not only baptized without their permission but also criticized them. Their minions came in search of some firsthand witness value. Priests and Levites asked John if he's the Messiah, or Elijah, or a prophet, and each time he said 'no.' Desperate for an answer they can report to their superiors they beg, 'Well who are you then?' John the Witness tells them he's come to pave the way for another but they seem unable to imagine that any religious leader would point to someone beyond himself.

"Do not despise the words of prophets but test everything." A lot of high hopes and skeptical questions surfaced in Bloedel Hall last Sunday when Occupy Seattle met with members of this congregation to request sanctuary here. Pastor Mike Denton of the United Church of Christ's Regional Conference has firsthand witness value of Occupy Seattle and thinks the movement has been more effective than the Church in lifting up the moral failings of greed, economic injustice and consumerism. Writing in *The Christian Century*, Union Seminary's Gary Dorrien uses firsthand witness of Occupy Wall Street to write "*They are building a social movement that prizes radical democracy, radical hospitality, and a distinct blend of nonviolence and outrage.*" Chris Hedges is a Harvard Divinity School graduate and former war correspondent for the New York Times whose firsthand witness led him to write, "*The Occupy Movement is the force that will revitalize traditional Christianity in the United States or signal its moral, social, and political irrelevance.*"

Dorrien writes that 10% of the U.S. population holds 70% of the wealth, while another 50% have only 2%. The Occupy Movement has targeted banks because, as Dorrien writes, "*Today the seven largest banks hold assets equal to 66% of GDP – a staggering concentration of economic power in a democracy. 20 years ago that figure*

was only 18%. The big banks, being too big to fail, got even bigger after they got their bailouts."

When asked last Sunday about Occupy's accomplishments, one representative cited the recent 'Bank Transfer Day' that challenged consumers to join small credit unions which are more likely to lend locally.

So, do you think that Occupy Seattle approached Saint Mark's because so many of us participate in their General Assembly meetings that we are known to be collaborators? Do they think many of us actually transferred our bank accounts? Does Occupy Seattle know where the Cathedral banks? Do you? (*pause*) Are we considering this relationship because our witness is already embedded with theirs, or is this another one of those affiliations you'll proudly testify to while letting your staff handle the firsthand relations?

As we approach the UN's International Year of the Cooperative in 2012, I'm hoping that governance matters will be given more light. Governance is one reason for my faith the transforming witness value of Oikocredit, a global cooperative of churches that lends money gathered from people in wealthy countries to borrowers in 71 poor countries. If you're outraged by the growing economic disparity within this country, consider how much worse it is between this country and much of the rest of the world. Or join Transformational Travel's next visit to Nicaragua for the purpose of witnessing "how most people live." Transformational Travel and Oikocredit give me hope that God's light of justice can and will enter our darkness in a manner that conveys the faithful conviction to change our vision and ways.

Hunter Tynes is a long time member (i.e., witness) and wise observer of this congregation. He has said that "We need to be held accountable for the disparity between the image we like to project about ourselves and where our real commitments lie." In holding one another accountable, we give witness to the light of what it means to be a community of hope. We are all sinners and saints alike. And every time we gather here, we all find the same welcome at a table flowing with holy mysteries where we await - with high hopes amid profound darkness - the light of Christ that has come, is here, and will come again.

So come! Test everything and be tested everyone.