

Title: I believe, therefore I have spoken (2Cor 4:5)

It's now the end of the school year. Congratulations to our High school and college grads. We commend you to God's care and grace, and encourage them to be all they can be. May God bless them as they embark upon a new chapter of their lives. But, we hope for more than successful lives. We pray that our graduates be shining beacons to the world, sharing their faith, to a world in darkness. They have a special word for this. The word is Martyr.

Do you know what the word "Martyr" means? Many people think it means a person who dies for his beliefs. But the real meaning of Martyr is something else. It is an ancient Greek word. The Greek word "marturion" means "witness." It spoke about a person who shared the truth about something. It was used in the courts of Law as well as in everyday usage. In the early centuries of the Christian church, the people who shared the story of the Gospel, were martyrs, witnesses. However, the people who witnessed about Christ, were frequently persecuted. Many times they were killed for their faith. Soon the persecution and the witness became associated with each other. Over the centuries, the word Martyr became identified with someone who dies for their witness, who dies for their faith. And that meaning has survived even to this day. It is important to remember the first meaning of Martyr, because God calls us to be that very thing. God calls each and every one of us to be witnesses to Jesus to shine the light of Christ into a world of darkness.

Sometimes it can be hard to talk about Jesus, to share the Gospel. People can be anywhere from totally uninterested to downright antagonistic. In fact, one of the things which we find is that... though God calls us to bring the light of Christ to all the world. Sometimes it is dangerous to bring light where it is not wanted. Sometimes it is dangerous to bring light where it is not wanted.

I used to explore the old silver mines in the Los Angeles mountains. When you go far enough into a mountain, you get into areas where light does not penetrate very much. When you bring light into these dark areas, things of great beauty are revealed. There were vaults of granite which when you shined light from a fluorescent bulb would sparkle like a million diamonds. Beautiful! Now, on the other hand, caves are sometimes the home of bats. They sleep in the darkness of caves. When you startle these bats with your flashlight they are unhappy... and they will vent their unhappiness upon you. There is nothing more frightening than having a thousand bats shrieking at you as they fly out of the cave. Not only is it frightening, but there is a danger to bringing light into a dark place. You see, bats have a disgusting habit of "relieving themselves" just before they take off to fly. Which means that, one of the disagreeable consequences of startling bats in a cave is that you end up covered with bat guano. Like I said, sometimes it is dangerous to bring light where it is not wanted.

The reason I tell this story is that sometimes it is similar to the task of sharing the Gospel with others. Some of our attempts to bring the light of Christ to someone, some of our attempts to bring light into the darkness, has left us with nothing but being covered with bat guano.

Sometimes it is dangerous to bring light where it is not wanted. There are many places in the world places of darkness where they do not know the light of Christ. Not only that, but they are places where they do not want the light of Christ. And when you try to bring the light of Christ there... there are consequences. In particular, I hear stories about our brothers and sisters in Christ in mission work, and the dangers they face, in shining the light in places where it is not wanted. I have a modern-day story of someone who suffered for bringing light into the darkness, a modern-day story of a real martyr.

A friend of mine worships at a Persian Christian Church in Los Angeles. Frequently their pastors would return to Iran to preach the gospel. Now, this is a dangerous mission. For to preach the Gospel in Muslim countries is to warrant death. On Dec 3, 1993, their Pastor Mehdi Dibaj was captured and brought before a Muslim court, to be tried for Apostasy. In Iran, Apostasy means “leaving the Muslim faith and preaching about Jesus Christ.” In Iran, Islam is the state religion... so you are born a Muslim. If you become a Christian, then that is considered to be apostasy. In Muslim countries, “apostasy” carries a terrible consequence. Apostates are given the death penalty. In fact, six months AFTER being brought before the Muslim court, Pastor Dibaj’s body was found stabbed to death by unknown assassins.

I believe that when Pastor Dibaj came before the Muslim court he was fully aware of the possible consequences of his actions. I believe that Pastor Dibaj knew the consequences of shining the light where it was not wanted. And yet he had the courage to do it anyway. Hear the courage in his witness.

I am a Christian, a sinner who believes Jesus has died for my sins on the cross and who by His resurrection and victory over death, has made me righteous in the presence of the Holy God. In response to this kindness, He has asked me to deny myself and be His fully surrendered follower, and not fear people even if they kill my body, I would rather have the whole world against me but know that the Almighty God is with me, to be called an apostate but know that I have the approval of the God of glory. Life for me is an opportunity to serve Him, and death is a better opportunity to be with Christ. Therefore I am not only satisfied to be in prison for the honor of His Holy Name, but am ready to give my life for the sake of Jesus my Lord and enter His kingdom sooner, With respect, your Christian prisoner, Mehdi Dibaj.

Think about what it would be like standing there, before a court for your faith. What would your thoughts be? “This is it! In the next few minutes I may be dead depending on how I respond. A clear choice comes before you: Do you recant and save your life? Or do you stand with those willing to proclaim their faith and die?

What is it about martyrs which give them the boldness to proclaim their faith, even in the face of death? This ability to boldly testify to the Gospel’s truthfulness..., even in the face of deadly threats. Is it a personality trait, training, intelligence?

Actually, according to Scripture, it is none of these. According the Scripture “It is a gift of God.” In 2Cor 4:13 it says:

“I believed; therefore I have spoken.”

With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak. The secret for boldness was, as scripture put it, that

“We believed.”

therefore

“We spoke.”

The world is blind to the work of God, so they do not believe... but those redeemed by Christ, through faith, are now given the grace to see the real work of God. We believe. And it will be precisely because we believe that we will be a witness. Listen carefully to pastor Dibaj’s words...

I am a Christian, a sinner who believes Jesus has died for my sins on the cross and who by His resurrection and victory over death, has made me righteous in the presence of the Holy God. In response to this kindness, He has asked me to deny myself and be His fully surrendered follower, and not fear people even if they kill my body,

Do you see the focus of his speech? It is not about how he was willing to suffer in the name of God... Rather, it was the proclamation of his relationship with God. Even in the face of death, it was the proclamation of the Gospel which was foremost. Those who see the true work of God, consider all, even death, to be unimportant compared to the life we have with God. This is why a person may be willing to boldly proclaim their faith even in the face of death. This is the key to shining the light of Christ even where it is not wanted and the willingness to suffer the consequences. For when we witness, when we bring light into the darkness, we do so simply because we are doing nothing more than speaking the truth.

This is how the Christian is empowered to proclaim. It comes from the answer to the question... What do you believe? What do you believe? Do you believe that Jesus is Lord and Savior Do you believe that you are a sinner that Jesus has died for your sins on the cross and who by His resurrection and victory over death, has made you righteous in the presence of the Holy God. The bottom line is that What you believe... that is what you will speak. What you believe, that is what you will preach. **THIS** is what **WE SHARE**. This is what we have in common with all the Christian martyrs of all time. Here in this Church at Immanuel First, **WE** believe in Christ... We witness and proclaim, as truth, the same message of Christ. In a world of darkness, in a world which does not want the light of Christ, we boldly bring light into a world which does not want it. We do so simply because it is the truth. That is the power of God’s word. It stands on its own power for it is the truth!

What God has asked us to do is not strange or new. You’ve been already doing this all along. You have already been a witness about Christ in the things that you do. You speak the truth in

all that you do.

(1) You come to church. That is your first witness to the world. When you come to church on Sunday you are making a public witness to all around you. When we worship we make a public witness about Christ For when we come to worship here, we proclaim to everyone around that God is worthy of worship.

(2) When we confess our sins at the beginning of our service we proclaim that we are sinful unworthy of God and that we need a savior.

(3) When we partake of the Lord's supper, we proclaim that the forgiveness of sins and salvation comes through Jesus Christ only.

It is precisely because we witness in our actions, that we too are martyrs/witnesses. Perhaps we are still in the body, but it makes us no less Martyrs. We stand by these witnesses of old, with all the martyrs of the world over all time and space. We stand with them. We are one of them. The battle for souls is not fought by them alone, but by all of us together in the kingdom of God, by everyone who stands up for the truth.

God has given you that great gift. You believe... You believe in the truth... God has called you to shine that light all around our neighborhood, to do nothing more than simply share the truth with our neighbors. Do not fear the share the truth. Amen.