6-20/21-20 Faithful Witnesses Rev. Amy Haines

Acts 10:34-43

When we reflect back on the year 2020, what will we remember? What stories will we tell?

Will our witness be one of complaint that everything shut down, or will our witness be one of thankfulness that we cared for one another? Will our story be one of sadness over the divisions in our world, or one of hope that we have begun to make lasting change?

A lot has changed in the past 15 weeks, since we last gathered together for in-person worship and a spaghetti dinner/ talent show to support our high school youth mission trip. Their plans have changed multiple times in multiple ways since then, just like so much else in our lives.

2020 continues to challenge us and shape us. What does it look like to love God and love neighbor in the midst of a global pandemic? What does it look like to love God and love neighbor in a world where so many are tired of being treated as less than simply by the color of their skin? What does it look like to love God and love neighbor when caring for one another means not being together as the gathered community? Is 2020 pulling us apart, or is 2020 inviting us into a new way of living, of being community, of following Jesus?

In the past 15 weeks, I have seen you love God and love neighbor in many ways, continuing to be the community of faith journeying with Jesus. You have wrestled with technology in order to worship or be in study together. You have worshipped with your households, showing the next generation that worship is still important no matter where we find ourselves. You have worshipped using only the bulletin copy, pondering God’s Word for the day in the comfort of your own home. You have prayed for one another, and for the world around us. You have financially supported SCAC. You have offered up a peaceful witness online and in person to the evils of racism. You have reached out to one another, and to your neighbors. You have provided meals for IHN families. You have done porch drops of supplies.

We are still the community of faith, whether we are gathered or scattered. What will be our lasting witness in the year 2020? Only time will tell.

I pray that our witness will be a light in the darkness, a word of hope to despair, a love for others that reflects God’s deep love for us. I pray that our witness will continue the witness of the early disciples, a witness of lives transformed through knowing and believing in and following Jesus.

Recall all of the scripture stories we have read and reflected on over the past three months,

stories of how the first disciples of Jesus were transformed by the agony of his death, the joy of his resurrection, the encouragement of his post-resurrection appearances, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Consider the transformation God brought about in one disciple named Peter. An ordinary fisherman called to follow Jesus, Peter was known to be impulsive and passionate. He would often speak first and think later.

On the night of Jesus’ betrayal, when Jesus told his disciples that all of them would desert him,

Peter emphatically brushed off such a claim, stating that he would rather die for Jesus. Then hours later, Peter not only denied Jesus once, he denied Jesus three times, claiming with an oath that he truly did not know the man. Then the cock crowed, and Peter cried.

On Easter morning Peter yearned for the story of the women to be true. Only when Jesus finally appeared to his disciples did Peter begin to hope and believe again.

Following Jesus’ ascension and the power of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost, Peter became a changed man, a bold man, a man no longer afraid to tell the story of Jesus. Peter’s story reminds us that God has a sense of humor, and if Peter can change, so can we!

By the time of our Scripture reading today in Acts chapter 10, Peter is the leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem. Until now he had been proclaiming the good news of Jesus only to the Jews.

Yet in Acts 10 God expands Peter’s vision, beyond the Jews to the Gentiles.

In Acts 10 God expands the ministry of the early church to share the good news of Jesus with all God’s beloved children, no matter who they were or where they came from. This is a radical shift that only God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, could accomplish.

Yet, it is also a shift that the author of Luke-Acts highlights at Jesus’ birth, with the arrival of the magi. This is a shift that is shown time and again throughout the Gospel when Jesus honors women, heals outcasts, and calls ordinary men and women to follow him. This is a shift that is glimpsed on the day of Pentecost, when those who heard the mighty wind and the good news in their own language were gathered in Jerusalem from all corners of the known world.

Now, here in Acts 10, God expands the good news of Jesus beyond the Jews to the Gentiles.

Acts 10 introduces us to Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a soldier of the empire, one of the despised oppressors of Israel, yet Scripture also describes him as a devout, God-fearing, generous man.

One day, while at his residence in Caesarea, Cornelius had a vision, to send for Simon Peter

who was currently witnessing to Christ in Joppa. The next day, in Joppa, Peter had a vision to eat food considered unclean by the Jews. Then he heard the voice of God tell him that

“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

Immediately following that vision, Peter was invited to Cornelius’ house, and obediently he followed where God called him, even into the home of a despised Gentile Roman soldier.

Our passage today is Peter’s witness to Cornelius and his household, the first sermon, so to speak, given to the Gentiles concerning Jesus. Following Peter’s sermon, the Holy Spirit was poured out in that place, and the gospel was forever expanded beyond the Jews to the Gentiles.

In Acts 10, we see Peter being a faithful witness to the power of God in Jesus; a faithful witness who goes where God sends him; a faithful witness who does not allow his own biases to stand in the way of God’s redemption of the world.

Acts 10 is another divine ripple of Jesus’ commission in Acts 1:8 coming true! Remember Jesus’ commission?

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Today that same good news, and that same commission, ripples down to us.

Like the generations who have gone before us, we are called today to be a witness to the transforming power, grace and love of God in our lives, through our faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

When we faithfully witness to Jesus in our lives, we bring the reality of God’s ways into our world: The reality of God’s love for each and every one of us. The reality that sin does not have to hold us back. The reality that Jesus came to usher in a new way of being in relationship with one another.

As Jesus read from Isaiah- God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.

(Lk 4:18)

As Peter proclaimed to Cornelius- God shows no partiality. Jesus is Lord of all.

As Paul later proclaimed to the church in Galatia- There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

(Gal 3.28)

What of God’s reality, what of God’s kingdom ways, are proclaimed through your words and your action? What is your witness? What is your story?

…Once a little boy came home from Sunday School and his mother asked,

“Who was your teacher?”

The little boy answered, “I don’t remember her name, but she must have been Jesus’ grandmother because she didn’t talk about anyone else.”

Does our conversation reflect our love of Jesus? Would our words and actions give away our relationship with him?

--Illustrations Unlimited page 490

Think back over just these past 15 weeks. How have you known that God is with you?

In what ways have your faith been challenged? In what ways have your faith been renewed?

How have you shared your faith story with others? Maybe it was in conversation with a close friend or family member. Maybe it was being intentional to continue to worship together as a household. Maybe it was speaking out on social media for the support of all God’s beloved.

Maybe it was sharing our link so that a friend could worship with you.

We are called to share our stories, stories of faith, of hope, of love, stories of Good Friday forgiveness and Easter transformation, stories of Jesus’ presence in our lives and stories of the courage to follow where the Spirit guides us.

We are called to live our stories, stories of transformation and grace, stories of kindness and compassion, stories of righteous anger and bold courage.

How do you share, in word and action, the good news of a God who loves us, a Savior who died for us, and a Spirit who empowers us? How do you share, in word and action, that the good news of Easter is for all God’s beloved? Our witness will be as diverse as we are here today.

Some of us are more vocal than others. Some of us enjoy helping more than speaking. Some of us proclaim our faith through music, and some of us proclaim our faith through compassion.

No matter what we say or how we live, we are all called to share the good news of Jesus in word and action.

..Peter shared the story of the risen Christ by preaching. Paul shared it through the written word. Mother Teresa shared it through caring for the poor. St. Augustine said, “preach the gospel always; when necessary, use words.” How are you called to share the good news of the risen Christ?

-Annie Lockhart-Gilroy, 4-21-19 umcdiscipleship.org

..On the Easter just before he died, William Sangster painfully printed a short note to his daughter. A deeply spiritual Methodist, he had been spearheading a renewal movement

in the British Isles after World War II. Then his ministry, except for prayer, was ended by a disease which progressively paralyzed his body, even his vocal chords.

That last Resurrection Sunday he spent on earth, still able to move his fingers, he wrote:

“How terrible to wake up on Easter and have no voice to shout, ‘He is risen!’

Far worse, to have a voice and not want to shout.”

--Illustrations Unlimited p.167

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have good news to shout, and good news to live!

We have good news that will transform our lives, and good news that seeks to transform the world around us!

When we reflect back on the year 2020, what will we remember? What stories will we tell?

May they be stories of faithful witness to our faith in Jesus, to God’s love and grace,

and to God’s transformation of our world!

Let us pray.