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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY
Year C/Pentecost 28/Isaiah 65:17-25; Canticle 9; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

An Opportunity to Testify

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

When I sat for the General Ordination Exam of the Episcopal Church almost twelve years ago now, the Board of Examining Chaplains—the group which devises the questions and administers the exam—was apparently made up of people who somehow thought that members of Episcopal Churches were preoccupied with apocalyptic concerns—the “end times”—and that priests-to-be needed to be tested on their competency to address those concerns. Many, including me, were shocked and dismayed when we opened an envelope and read a question about “premillennial dispensationalism.” Before I even began to answer the question, I had to do some quick research to try to ascertain the meaning of the term “premillennial dispensationalism.” And, I would be challenged to give you a clear definition even today. Another question had to do with particular scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments that make reference to the apocalyptic concerns that apparently were present in the periods of time in which they were written. And yet another question had to do with how to respond to a parishioner whose fears of the rapture had been stirred by reading the Left Behind series. Funny thing—in almost ten years of ordained ministry—no one in the church has ever expressed concerns to me about “end times”! And I understand that some changes have been made in the composition of the Ordination Exam.

There was a time when Jesus' prophecy in our gospel reading from Luke would have seemed far-fetched. Unfortunately it seems much less so today. Doomsday predictions have been around for centuries, but Luke's language feels disturbingly contemporary in this particular day and time. Natural disasters fuel doomsday predictions, and we have no shortage of natural disasters--hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, earthquakes, famines, droughts, winds spreading wild fires.

Wars and violence fuel doomsday predictions. And, unfortunately, we have no shortage of wars and violence either. We know of violent situations that have gone on for so long that whole segments of populations are having their entire lives shaped by an environment of warfare—an environment of chaos. We cannot imagine what the world must be like for the thousands of children living in Aleppo, Syria right now, and what the effects of living day after day in a war zone will have on their long-term mental health.

A couple of days ago, my daughter forwarded a mass voice message to me that had been sent out to all homes of students in the Metro Nashville Public School system. The message alerted parents and caregivers to the fact that many children and young people were showing signs of having been traumatized to varying extents from exposure to the extremely divisive political atmosphere of the past months, culminating in the presidential election this past week. The calm and concerned voice on the message informed families that counselors are available to work with students through this troubling time and also that school personnel would be focusing more in the near future on education toward understanding the workings of government, citizenship, and voting. We know how stressful this electoral season has been to all of us, to

some extent, but it is troubling to think that our children have essentially been exposed to life in a different sort of war zone and they have not been unaffected by the experience.

As Episcopalians, we believe ourselves to be “progressive” Christians, and, as such, we don’t sit around shaking in our boots waiting for Judgment Day, or spend much time feeling fearful about the end of the world as we know it. We don’t believe in a wrathful, vengeful God. At the same time, we know that we are living in dangerous times and that there are many unknowns and issues of great concern, issues that threaten our lives or even the life of the planet. We get a little anxious about the possibility of a flu pandemic that could have disastrous effects—and we already know of strains of infections that are invulnerable to medications. We also know that there is great unrest around the globe, and, since September 11, 2001, we have known beyond a shadow of a doubt that humanity is capable of executing far greater destruction than the bombs dropped in World War II.

We live in a world of more and more rapid change, and it is a great temptation to try to “hold on tight” to what we have. We don’t want to let go of any part of the “American dream”—a dream that has become part of who we think we are and that we have come to think of as reality—something that is our birth-right. It makes sense that we might want to isolate and hunker down and secure ourselves against all threats.

Our technology has created a global village, and we haven’t seen clearly or come to terms with what it will take to live in that huge village. Humankind grew out of a history of tribalism. We once needed tribes in order to survive. Paradoxically, the tribalism that was at one time our means of survival may end up being the thing that destroys us. Globalization threatens our usual definitions of “tribe.” It challenges us to think in terms of a global tribe—to think of that child in

Aleppo, who is living in the midst of bombs and gunfire, as being one of our tribe. It challenges us to think of the thousands of Hispanic immigrants, including “illegals,” living invisibly in our midst as ones of our tribe. It challenges us to think of the thousands living around this very church, who don’t have the luxury of being unconcerned about job stability or health care coverage or the basics of life, as ones of our tribe.

Jesus tells his listeners, “Do not be terrified.” Do not to be afraid. The voice of fear has nothing constructive to offer. The voice of fear perpetuates the problem—perpetuates danger. Too often the church itself has perpetuated a fear response. The church has a long history of splinter groups responding to change with fear and attempting to cling to words that seem less and less relevant in an increasingly secular world. We who are surrounded by churches, and church goers, find it hard to believe or to remember that the Christian church has essentially collapsed in much of the world. Paradoxically, our hanging on to old ways of thinking is killing the church. Churches have become tourist spots in England and throughout most of Europe. We love those beautiful edifices, but humankind has largely grown beyond the need or desire for some sort of outside, or top-down, authority that is practiced within those walls. The practice of our faith must be based on something more than affirmation of a creed and obedience to a set of eternal laws. Our Presiding Bishop calls that “something more” joining the Jesus Movement. The Jesus Movement urges us to love God the way Jesus loved God, to look intensely at Jesus’ life and message, to be transformed by that vision, and to commit to following in his path. Jesus’ message was not “believe in me.” It was “follow me.”

Jesus tells his listeners that times of crisis are an “opportunity to testify.” Many people are looking for and creating opportunities to testify to a different message. We, too, are looking

for and creating opportunities. We know that the traditional message of judgment and condemnation has run its course, and we also know that there is an alternative message of love and hope and peace and unity that is the message of Jesus. That message desperately needs a voice—many voices. Philip Newell, Church of Scotland minister and Celtic scholar, who spends much of his time in New Mexico, tells the story of a Native American man who lives there and who has been a prophet of sorts to Philip. One day Philip was talking with the man about his great concern for our global crisis, and he asked the man, “What do I have to offer?” The wise friend’s response was, “Offer your treasure. Offer Christ.”

How do we offer Christ to a world that is often appears to be tottering on the brink of disaster? How do we offer ourselves as witnesses? How do we take the “opportunity to testify”?

In her poem “Making Peace,” Denise Levertov writes:

A voice from the dark called out,
 "The poets must give us
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar
imagination of disaster. Peace, not only
 the absence of war."

But peace, like a poem,
 is not there ahead of itself,
 can't be imagined before it is made,
 can't be known except
 in the words of its making,
 grammar of justice,
 syntax of mutual aid.

Love and peace and hope and unity are not there without their embodiment. God comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ to show us what those things look like—and we have a vivid picture in our gospel accounts. Jesus Christ embodied God’s self-giving love, and, as the Body of Christ, we are called to fully live that same self-giving love. We offer our treasure to a needy world whenever our words and our lives show the world what love and peace and hope and unity

look like. May God grant us the courage to live every day writing and re-writing that poem.

Amen.