

Bearing Witness
Mark 13.1-13
Gail Serratt, November 15, 2009

What does it mean to bear witness? The writer of Mark's gospel has certainly given us a witness to the life, teachings and reconciling work of Jesus. Mark is writing to his first century community, some thirty-five years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jerusalem is under attack by Rome. The temple may be close to being destroyed if it has not already occurred. The Emperor Nero is persecuting Christians. It is a time of suffering. It is also a time of growth for Christianity as the community seeks to follow Christ *in the midst of suffering*. Mark encourages his community by sharing the Good News.

Indeed Mark skillfully crafts his gospel so that his listeners relate to the disciples who follow Jesus – relating to their expectations, their questions, their confusion. And if we're honest, we find ourselves relating to the disciples as well.

Jesus is nearing the end of his earthly ministry. Our Scripture passage has Jesus coming out of the temple for the last time. In less than a week, Jesus will move closer to the cross, the tomb and eventually the right hand of God. Prior to coming out of the temple, Jesus saw a widow give everything she had to the temple treasury. She was most likely in the Court of Women where trumpet-shaped receptacles were placed for one's contribution (tithe). Those who wanted to make a show of their gift could easily do so, simply by the sound of the larger, heavier coins in greater number spinning around the receptacle. One would scarcely have heard the widow's gift. She cast in her entire livelihood, her all. Soon Jesus would do the same. She bore witness to the gospel for Jesus and it caught his attention.

As they leave the temple, one of the disciples remarks about the greatness of the temple structure. It's rather 'telling' what catches our attention and on what we choose to marvel. Jesus

sees two tiny coins that amount to so little (unless you're the widow) and marvels at the woman's unlimited, lavish gift. The disciples see the majesty of the temple structure and marvel at its size, not realizing its huge limitations -- in its power structure...

which Jesus will soon throw down, metaphorically-speaking. Certainly the forecast of the temple's destruction by Jesus is not meant to disparage the temple cult; the temple represented for Israel the place where God dwelt and where sins were forgiven. Rather Jesus is upset with the way in which God's house was being managed and manipulated. The system was the issue.

Let's take an imaginary stroll through the temple in Jerusalem, with its four courts on levels that ascend toward the holiest point, where the presence of God resided.¹ I imagine signs throughout the temple posting restrictions. A Gentile can enter the outer courtyard, but go no further. Jews can enter into the second court, which includes the Court of Women although women can only go to the bottom of the steps where there is a gate. Stop here. Jewish men may enter through the gate and climb the steps to the third area: the Court of Israel. But that is their limit. The upper fourth court is reserved for priests. Only one, the designated high priest could enter the sanctuary and within - the holy of holies.

So there were certain places you could go depending on *who* you were. *Access* was restricted the closer one came toward God's presence. (The closer one attempted to come to God, the more restrictions and the fewer who were allowed to do so.) Jesus changed all this. Upon his death and resurrection, barriers were removed and signs disappeared. *Everyone* has *access* to the presence of God. No matter *where* you are or *who* you are -- ***all now stand on holy ground.***

Like the widow, Jesus gave of himself fully to grant *access* to all of us. And as his disciples, we must bear witness to this act of liberation we have received. Last Monday evening,

¹ For a description of the Second Temple, see Josephus' work referenced in *Apion* 2.8; 103-109. For a good translated source of Josephus' historical work, see William Whiston, translator of *The Works of Josephus* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 799.

I saw on television the twentieth anniversary celebration on the breaking down of the Berlin Wall that had separated East from West Germany for so long. It was monumental. People who had witnessed the event were re-telling their stories about freedom...about *access*.

Now having access on holy ground does not secure a life free from suffering. What it does secure...is assurance knowing God is with us, come what may. This is our stance as Christians, as those who believe that Jesus is Lord.

As some of the disciples sit with Jesus on the Mount of Olives, we listeners also get to hear Jesus' discourse to the disciples. Indeed, anytime the disciples ask Jesus a question in private, it is as if Mark asks his listeners to slow down and lean in - this is really important.²

The disciples ask Jesus for times and signs. Perhaps they were wondering that if the temple, where God resides is destroyed, does this signal the end? Jesus answers the timing question later in the chapter – “only the Father knows.” Jesus often answers questions with another question or a difficult parable, but here Jesus' response is direct, even though he does not *specify* the actual signs. Rather he shares *how* we should interpret the events to come. That's Jesus. Keeping us mentally alert.

Jesus says, “many will come in my name and lead many astray.” How are we going to be led astray? The Greek verb here is rendered “to wander off the path.” What is the off road terrain or the wrong path? One area suggested by the text is thinking that we are living in the end times; that the end of the world is upon us. Wars and quarrelling nations, earthquakes are the *beginning* of birth pangs (v.8); these are not signs for the end. Another wrong path is thinking that the future will resolve everything, so why do anything now. Incidentally the new doomsday date is Dec. 21, 2012 and a movie about it opened this weekend. I'll probably go see it. It is

² Mark's Gospel maintains a rapid pace with episodes written in a brief, straightforward account of dialogue and actions, so in those times when the disciples ask Jesus to explain something “in private” (often a parable), we sense a *slowing down*, perhaps to intensify the message that is to follow.

important to watch and read and have discussions about these topics; but unless we study the Scripture together, how do we know what is real and what is imaginary? What is fiction and what is truth? Another stray path is to allow these types of fictional movies and books, e.g. *Left Behind* series to get fused into becoming Scripture...or worse to replace it entirely.

The Bible bears witness to truth, not fiction. That does not mean that Scripture is to be read as a literal, black and white, practical guide of moral maxims that we look up and apply to our lives. Rather this book is filled with stories and metaphors, allegories and history and actual events and testimonies and proverbial wisdom. Of course the voices differ and don't always agree, because it's a book about us and our relationship with God. It's inconsistent because we have a God who loves us and co-authors life with us in each of our ways. The Word speaks to our hearts, our minds, and it particularly speaks to our souls in ways that cannot be articulated. This book of truth is our witness who never ages; it is a light for our path in a very dark world.

In the last section of this passage, we turn to discipleship. As Jesus prepares his disciples on the Mount, he reminds them of their task to testify and proclaim to all the nations the Good News. It is the equivalent of Matthew's Great Commission and just like Matthew, this mountaintop message is for *everybody*...not a special group or for ones with the gift of speaking.

In fact, the disciples are told that they will stand in court to testify, thus providing an opportunity to witness to the Gospel. While being arrested, beaten and taken to court sounds horrific enough, a more dreadful fear may have loomed over the disciples. Unlike today where everyone who goes to court is entitled to representation, defense attorneys didn't exist in the first century. The accused could not hire a lawyer to speak on their behalf. One's fate depended on one's own eloquence. Of course only the wealthy and privileged were educated in rhetoric. Most of the followers of Jesus would not have had such training. And yet they must defend their

proclamation before a hostile judge, who would probably look down on uneducated speech.³

Jesus assures them not to worry, that the Holy Spirit will provide.

Skip forward to Mark's community, where people were being brought before Roman authorities and again those followers who were not in power would also have been comforted to know they were not alone – the Holy Spirit would assist. Fast forward to today and feel the assurance given that the Holy Spirit will aid us in our witness.

What does bearing witness encompass? I don't believe it is simply about giving testimony to the end times (although that is a part). Our concern is to give testimony to the Gospel - to the nations, in our neighborhoods where people may be hungry for the bread of life. They need our healing words, our actions that claim our Christianity and the hope that resides in us.

Three weeks ago we were told that children had some barriers and we could read to them. They need our witness to hope. Two weeks ago we were reminded about our passivity and loss of living. Like Lazarus, we must bear witness to the one who gives us life. And last Sunday we were asked to take notice of the homeless, to have compassion and give them shelter. In all of these situations, are we not taking a step toward pointing to Christ who liberates all, who gives access? The disciples went about proclaiming the Gospel. It may have been like this standing in front of a group, or it may have been on a casual conversation on the front porch with a friend. Or like the widow, perhaps no words were uttered. She simply witnessed by her unselfish action.

The infinite ways in which one can minister to others is up to us. This is our part, but we are not alone. How we notice, listen and attend to others and what we give them (physically, emotionally, spiritually) is guided by the Holy Spirit, blessed by Jesus Christ and is part of reconciling all of creation to God. May it be so!

³ Pheme Perkins, The Gospel of Mark in *The New Interpreter's Bible*: Vol. VIII, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 688.