

**2Cor. 4:6** For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

**7** But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. <sup>11</sup> For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.

June 25, 2017

## **A Goodly Heritage**

2 Corinthians 4:6-11

*The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.* – Psalm 16:6

Over the last quarter century, our congregation has sent six groups of young people and their adult advisors to Scotland to learn the story of the birth of Presbyterianism, and what a difficult and painful birth process it was. I have now had the privilege of sharing in four of those six pilgrimages. Each trip I have learned more and come to a deeper understanding of the turmoil and tragedy that accompanied the formation of this Presbyterian church we so easily take for granted.

It was, and continues to be, a painful story to hear and share, not only because of the injustices of the established Roman church upon the Reformers, but also, oftentimes, the extreme actions of the Reformers against Catholicism's established power. Through this past year, Erin and I met with our youth group to talk about some of the reasons for the Protestant Reformation and how it all happened in Scotland: the insistence that the pope was Lord of the church; prayers were to be made to the saints, that one must do penance for every sin committed in life or one would be excluded from the kingdom of heaven, leaving out the entire idea of being saved by grace through Christ's death and resurrection; the belief that bread and wine magically became the literal, physical body and blood of Christ in the mass; and that the church told people what the Bible said, rather than allowing people to read it for themselves. Not to mention the sale of indulgences.

But telling and seeing are two different things. Standing in the place where a young, powerful preacher, named George Wishart was burned at the stake for preaching the ideas of the Reformation moves you.

This event inspired a man name John Knox, a friend of Wishart's, to become a leader of change, and, in 1560 the Presbyterian Church of Scotland was established with John Knox pastoring the mother church, St Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh. Our Affirmation of Faith this morning is part of the Scots Confession, partly written by Knox. Indeed, we have a goodly heritage.

But, there's another part of the story that a group of us learned on Monday afternoon, and it happened quite unexpectedly. When we arrived in Edinburgh last Sunday, we were met by a tour guide who was truly exceptional. She is a native of Edinburgh; knows its streets and its stories like no one else I've met. Her kids went to school with the children of JK Rowling, of Harry Potter fame, and, on Monday afternoon, before she would let some of us go shopping, she just had to show us a couple more things. She took us to lunch on the street that became Diagon Alley in Harry Potter, and then she took us to a tiny chapel I did not even know existed. Let me tell you the story of the Covenanters and Magdalen Chapel.

Although Presbyterianism became the official church of Scotland in 1560, the truth is, it did not stay that way for long. Within just a few decades, the Church of England began to move into Scotland. In the Church of England, the king is head of the church, and many of the beliefs and worship practices were taken straight from Catholicism. Many Scottish Presbyterians resisted this encroachment, but it continued to gain power.

A group of leaders gathered and wrote a "covenant" pledging faithfulness to the principles of Presbyterianism. The first signers of this covenant gathered in this little chapel before copies were sent around the country gaining thousands of signatures. Secret gatherings of Presbyterians took place around the country to worship as they believed, but this just caused the throne to clamp down harder. The late 1600's had gotten so bad they were called "the killing years." Some of those killed in Edinburgh were brought back Magdalen Chapel, and the table is still there where their bodies were prepared for burial.

While we were sitting in this little room hearing this account, looking at this table where the bodies were prepared for burial, and feeling the history hanging in the air around us, Deborah Brown asked a question that changed the course of the conversation. She asked if any women were involved in this covenant. I had already heard the story of Jenny Geddes, who threw a stool at the preacher in St. Giles Cathedral who suggested that Episcopal worship practices should be instituted there. That's why we have pews today, so you can't throw a stool at the preacher when we say something you don't like! But, as a means of illustrating how much women were involved, our guide told us the story of the two Margarets.

Margaret MacLauchlan was a covenanter. An older woman – accounts vary from 60 to 80 – she had been arrested and convicted of disobeying the king's prohibition against secret gatherings of Presbyterians. Margaret Wilson was 18. Growing up, she and her brother and sister had often had to

hide from government troops because they wouldn't go to hear the Episcopal ministers. One day, however, Margaret and her sister Agnes (13) were finally caught. Their father managed to get Agnes released because of her young age, but he couldn't save Margaret.

On May 11, 1685, Margaret Wilson and Margaret MacLauchlan were sentenced to be drowned. The soldiers took them to the mouth of the river where it emptied into the sea, and tied them both to wooden stakes in the water at low tide. The younger Margaret was tied nearer to the shore so she would watch the older woman die first as the tide came in and be persuaded to give up her beliefs. As the older woman was drowning, the soldiers asked the younger Margaret what she thought of her now. Watching the elder Margaret struggle for her last breaths, Margaret Wilson replied "I see Christ wrestling there". Then, just when she herself was about to drown, the soldiers lifted up her head and asked her to pray for the king.

"Dear Margaret," urged a bystander, "say `God save the King."

"God save him if He will," she replied. "It is his salvation I desire."

"She has said it! she has said it!" cried the pitying bystanders eagerly.

"That won't do," shouted the man in charge, "let her take the test—oaths." As this meant the repudiation of the Covenants and the submission of her conscience to the King—to her mind inexcusable sin—the young girl firmly refused to obey. She was thrust back into the water, and in a few minutes more she was with her Lord.<sup>1</sup>

In our reading from Second Corinthians, Paul says that God has entrusted us with a most precious message: the good news of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. Paul says it is like putting a treasure in clay pots. Clay pots were cheap, easy to come by, and they broke easily. They were for carrying water, not something you needed to protect. We are the clay pots in which the gospel has been placed. We break easily; we break with the truth; we break when tempted by money and power. And yet God uses us to carry the living water of salvation through time.

We saw the truth of Paul's words that those who have gone before "are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies."

My hope and prayer is that the 19 youth and 6 other adults who went on this trip gained a deeper understanding of the things we Presbyterians offer to the Body of Christ. But, more deeply, what others have sacrificed so that we can gather here each Sunday in peace, and that our call is to make sure our children and grandchildren have the same opportunity to hear and learn and live the Good News that Christ is head of the church; that Scripture alone is the means by which we hear God's Word, and that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone.

May they never have to endure the persecutions those have in the past – and some endure today. But may they pass along to their children and grandchildren this saving message for which others have died so that we might receive.

Indeed, we have a goodly heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Ballantyne, Robert. *Hunted and Harried: A Tale of the Scottish Covenanters* (pp. 106-107). Kindle Edition.