

Max Miller Sermon

July 11, 2021

Redeemer Lutheran Church

Witness is often a theme that is presented to us during and following the season of Easter. We often associate it with Mary Magdalene the disciples when they witness Jesus being crucified and his subsequent and triumphant rise from the dead. It describes those who spread the message in the wake of the ascension and those who laid their lives down for their faith. In the legal system witnesses are those sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth- which for our purposes, is quite a statement for a nation who prides itself on the separation of religion and government. In study, witnesses to the gospel are often great figures, Mother Theresa who healed the sick and took in the poor. Martin Luther King who spoke and marched for the truth that our brothers and sister in Christ regardless of color deserved equal rights. Even Origen of Alexandria, a fourth century church father and theologian, one of the first to adequately testify to the mystery of the holy trinity. These men and women are great witness, and their legacy is a fine example of the way in which our actions are meant to glorify God. However, great witnesses of the gospel are not always great figures. In our old testament reading from today we hear from the Prophet Amos about the bringing justice against Israel. Now you may be thinking to yourself, “Amos is a prophet, of course he is a great witness.” On the contrary, it is made clear in chapter

7 verse 14 that Amos is “not a prophet nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman”. In those days there were schools of prophesy in which men learned to prophesy to the people. These men were considered professional prophets and their prophecy often catered to kings or others who had great power. In Amos’ time Jeroboam II would have been king of the northern kingdom and the professional prophets would have prophesied to satisfy him. Amos did the opposite and his prophesy critiqued not only king Jeroboam but for told of the destruction of Israel. And this is where witness comes in. Rather than pay homage to an earthly king, Amos gives witness to God and his unwavering and steadfast justice. In the story God speaks of setting a plumb line against Israel. A plumb line is tool used by carpenters to keep their work straight and square. The plumb line does not acquiesce to the carpenters’ desires, neither does God’s truth waiver in the face of earthly power. This metaphorical plumb line is symbolic of God’s standard for our witness to his truth. It is unwavering and unrelenting just as the gravity by which the plumb line functions is unwavering and unrelenting. In our witness to the gospel of Christ we are called to do the same. We should not be possessed to do the right thing by the culture of the day, rather our deeds should be a reflection of our witness to God’s truths and the plumb line he sets before us. Fast forward 800 years from Amos and we find a simple man named John continuing to ignore the earthly power of kings and favor of true authentic witness to the will of God. John, in the face of dire consequences, remained steadfast in the law and did not fear retaliation because he believed in the truth that he spoke. In fact, John’s witness was so great that Herod even assumes Jesus

might be John who has returned from the dead. A testament to the power and truth of John's prophesy.

Both Amos and John were remarkable figures, but their greatness did not make their witness true. On the contrary it was their truth that made them great. They feared nothing on earth. They believed in their God so strongly that they refused to heed warnings because witness to the will of God was more important. It was Amos who was told to flee and preach in the southern kingdom of Judea because "the land [was] not able to bear all his words" and it was Amos who resolutely responded, "the Lord said to me 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'" In our ever tumultuous and changing world such resolve is hard to fathom. The term "truth" comes with its fair share of disclaimers. The "truth" can vary depending on your source. Every source has bias; every story, an agenda; every account, an angle. God's truth has no bias, no hidden agenda, no angle. The Bible may be complex, but the message is clear. Witness to the Gospel is not a political statement, nor social outreach, nor charity or reparation. It is the work the God demands from us every single day. It is the work that those suffering in our world need from us at their worst and the truth they glorify at their best. However, such witness is not a simple task, nor is the progression linear. Though you may dedicate yourself to proclaiming your witness, one does not simply wake up with the ability to perfectly proclaim. Take the disciples for example. Jesus' closest companions fell asleep in the garden. Thomas refused to believe until he saw the marks in Jesus' hands. Even Peter denied Jesus three times. Yet these are the men responsible for spreading the Gospel message through incredible witness to

the events of Jesus ministry and resurrection. Authentic witness does not come from great figures. Authentic witness takes the humble, the downtrodden, the meek and elevates them to feats of greatness only achieved through Him who they glorify. Martin Luther King was a humble minister from Georgia whose witness and thirst for justice propelled him to lead a movement that profoundly changed this country. Desmond Tutu, a renowned theologian and advocate whose witness was to preach equality for God's creation in South Africa. The witness of these men made the difference in how they chose to shape the world. And so, it is with our witness. However great or small our witness strengthens people, proclaims truth, and builds community. Like Amos and John, you have the ability to witness to the truth in the face of dire consequences. It just takes resolve and resilience. And if the last year is any indication, there is plenty of that to go around.