

Apr 12 2EasterAO

We ARE Witnesses!

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May the meditations of our hearts and the words of my lips be acceptable to You, O Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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The theme for this morning's meditation is We ARE Witnesses. It comes to us from Jesus, Himself when He visited the disciples who were cowering in fear. It was the evening of Resurrection Day. The disciples had heard about the reports, "**He is not here. He is risen as He said.**" Nevertheless, they were fearful of the Jews—fearful that they, too, might be crucified. Into their fearful quivering behind locked doors, Jesus appears. "**Peace be with you.**"

Then Jesus presented to them His physical evidence, literally, and showed them His spiked hands and His pierced side. Then, again, Jesus quieted their trembling hearts before issuing His bold marching orders. Did you catch it?

"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you." This "sending" is not a one-time passing comment by Jesus. 40 days later, at His ascension Jesus would promise His disciples (and you and me), "**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth"** (Acts 1.8).

Furthermore, at this same occasion of Jesus' ascension into heaven, Jesus issued His Great Commission, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age**" (Matt 28.18b-20).

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, make no mistake, our risen Savior is sending the disciples and you and me into a sinful and hostile world to be witnesses to Christ and Christ crucified.

Martin Luther understood this! Luther was to be martyred. In 1505, young Martin Luther entered the monastery. Within three years, he was ordained a priest. Soon after, Luther was sent on a trip to Rome, where he was sickened by the moral corruption there. In 1512, Luther received a doctorate in theology and was appointed professor of Holy Scripture at Wittenburg.

Luther spent long hours studying the Psalms, Romans, Hebrews, and Galatians. The more he studied the Word of God, the more he could not agree with various teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Specifically, Luther disagreed with the teaching that man must do his share of good works in accomplishing his own salvation. Neither could Luther agree that the pope had the authority to forgive sins through the selling of indulgences.

On October 31, 1517, Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses. They were written in Latin for academic debate. However, they were soon translated into German and distributed across the country. Immediately, Luther was called a heretic by friars and priests throughout the land. Many cried out for his public execution. Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor; Charles V, later Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain; and Pope Leo X all demanded that Luther be silenced.

The Scripture readings for today, as we have said, all remind us that if you are Christian—you are God's witness and you are sent into the world to give that witness. It was true for the disciples. It was true for Luther almost five hundred years ago. And it is true for you and me—today.

Beloved in the Lord, regardless of the opposition of our society, or the irregular unconstitutional restrictions of our government, or even the potentially life-and-death dangers of our surroundings, we firmly hold and are convicted of heart and soul that WE MUST OBEY GOD RATHER THAN MEN. Therefore, we declare that salvation is given as a gift to those who believe in Christ Jesus, the crucified and risen Savior.

Luther was summoned to Augsburg to meet with his cardinal—his supervisor, honcho. Cardinal Cajetan (KAH-te-yhan) pulled out a document called a papal bull, an official decree, written by Pope Leo X. This decree announced the pope's authority to sell indulgences for forgiveness of sins. Also, it declared that faith was NOT necessary for one who receives the Sacrament.

Luther responded that popes and church councils have erred in the past and even contradicted one another. Therefore, according to Luther, such decrees should only be obeyed when their pronouncements conform with Holy Scripture. This is precisely the point I am making when I say, “Don’t believe it because I said it. Don’t believe it because the Pope said it. And, be careful, don’t believe it because your mamma said it. Believe it because, What Does the Bible Say?”

In our Gospel reading, Jesus gave the disciples a simple command, “**As the Father has sent Me, even so I m sending you.**” Jesus breathed on them, blessing them with the Holy Spirit.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we catch a glimpse of the disciples doing what Jesus had commanded. Peter and the disciples had been teaching and preaching in the temple. They were brought by guards before the Sanhedrin and told that they must not preach about Jesus anymore. But Peter and the disciples refused to obey the Jewish Council. Even though they were standing before the religious, political, and judicial rulers of their day, the disciples openly declared that they would obey God rather than men.

The disciples witnessed to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. They named Jesus the source of life and author of salvation. God had made the disciples to be witnesses for Jesus Christ and so had the Holy Spirit, who now lived within them.

Beloved in the Lord, it is extremely important to take note of the message that the disciples proclaimed. It was both Law and Gospel. That is, it not only declared what wonderful things Jesus had done; it declared what terrible things the Sanhedrin had done. The disciples confronted the Jewish council with the reality of their sin before God.

“The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging Him on a tree.” Is there any question that the disciples did not confront the religious leaders of the day with their sin before God? We call that the Law!

At the same time, the disciples proclaimed the truth of God’s wondrous Gospel. Did you catch it? God had exalted Jesus to His right hand and made Jesus the Author and Savior of life. The witness

of the disciples was a direct appeal to all the members of the Sanhedrin to repent; to accept the free gift of faith from the Holy Spirit; and to believe and confess, like Thomas, “**My Lord and my God!**”

The Bible does not record what happened in the hearts of the councilmen. We know Gamaliel (GAMAY-lee-el) immediately spoke on behalf of the disciples. Also, we know that later, some Pharisees and some of the Sanhedrin became Christians.

Back to Luther. In the months after facing Cardinal Cajetan, (KAH-te-yhan), Luther would work at a feverish pace. He continued teaching and preaching, researching and writing, publishing and debating. The volume of material he produced is astonishing. By 1520, Luther was on record as disputing the infallibility of the pope, attacking Rome’s theology of the sacraments, and defining his position on justification and good works. Pope Leo X answered by condemning Luther as a heretic and issuing an official decree excommunicating Luther—kicking Luther out of the church.

Luther’s response, in classic Luther style, was to publicly burn the pope’s official decree. In 1521, Luther was summoned to appear before, what has been called, “the highest earthly authorities of his world,” the Diet of Worms. Luther was ordered to recant—to “take back” everything that he said. Not surprising, Luther would not. Luther’s solemn witness “before the highest earthly authorities of the world” MUST be faithful—solely—to God’s holy Word. Like the disciples, Luther **must obey God rather than men.**

Within days, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, declared Luther an outlaw and a heretic. That meant that anyone in all of Germany is permitted to kill Martin Luther. Which is why we said, “Luther was to be martyred!”

So, there you have it. Luther must obey God rather than men and lived the rest of his life knowing that at any time, someone could show up and kill him, with the permission of the Holy Roman Emperor. Similarly, the disciples were flogged and beaten. They were commanded not to speak about this Jesus guy any more. The Bible says, “**they left rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus.**”

Which brings us to ... us! We ARE Witnesses.

I will close with this remarkable story.

Picture of the Cross Monument

History of the Cross Monument

My testimony, my presentation, my witness before the Charlotte Co., commissioners.

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm (Eph 6.10-13).

God grant it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jer 29.11 NIV).