

Jon Hauerwas – September 30, 2018 – “A Public Profession”
Psalm 26:1-3, 6-8, 11-12 and Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-15

Damon J. Keith is a Senior United States Circuit Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals who, during the pre-Watergate era, ruled that the government could not wiretap individuals without a warrant. In presenting the decision, Keith proclaimed that “democracy dies in the dark.”¹ His point was that unchecked government power poses a threat to the systems and institutions that are vital to our national freedoms.

Decades later, the *Washington Post* paid homage to Judge Keith with the adoption of its new motto. The phrase, “Democracy Dies in Darkness,” now appears on the cover of each issue. In both instances, the sentiment remains the same: the courts and the media may serve as a necessary check of creeping government power. Yet, following this change at the *Post*, feedback from readers was predictably mixed. Many suggested that the first two words, “democracy” and “dies,” sounded far too sinister and negative. “Isn’t there a more positive way to say this,” they wondered.

For the very first followers of Jesus, the words “crucified” and “Lord” sounded far too sinister and negative, as well. In Matthew’s Gospel, we hear that “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must undergo great suffering at the hands

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-washington-posts-new-slogan-turns-out-to-be-an-old-saying/2017/02/23/cb199cda-fa02-11e6-be05-1a3817ac21a5_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.add57ba73759. Accessed on September 29, 2018.

of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’” And yet, as we now know, the crucifixion did happen – not in darkness but in the middle of the day, on a hill that was visible for all to see.

“It can be a dangerous thing to tell the Jesus story,” writes Tom Long, because not only can it strengthen faith, it can also imperil it. “The incarnation, taken out of context, is a discouraging story of bitter defeat. ‘We had hoped,’ say the two disheartened followers on the Emmaus road, ‘that he was the one to redeem Israel.’”

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“Taken by itself, the story of Jesus is a mournful story of a victim overpowered by his enemies. Taken alone, the narrative of Jesus from birth to the cross is the moving but finally despairing story of one who courageously took on the powers that be but, in the end, was no match for them. We easily forget that the central narrative of the Christian faith is, on the face of it, a deep embarrassment.”

² Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012) Pg. 25.

Friends, early Christians were painfully aware “that Jesus died in shame, and that the cross is, to reasonable eyes, an inexplicable stumbling block to faith.”³

Well, if you have not heard, Westminster offers a Bible study at noon each Thursday in the church library. In the course of those weekly conversations, my own spiritual development is often strengthened. The discussion this week supports my point very well. Midway into the conversation, one of the class participants asked me a series of questions that were both deeply personal and profoundly theological in nature. She said, “Jon, do you ever feel discouraged about the state of Christendom in the world? Does it always feel like you are pushing a boulder up a hill? Do you sometimes wonder why you have given your life to the ministry?”

I did not shy away from the questions. In fact, I appreciated them. And, in response, I offered my own, personal confession. “Yes, I do,” I said. “I do get discouraged. But, my sense of ministry is grounded in the notion that for Jesus and for those who follow him, an easy life was never promised.” Or to borrow another phrase from Tom Long, while the crucifixion is visible, the exaltation is primarily hidden. This hiddenness “constitutes the danger to hope, the threat to steadfast faith. In terms of immediate experience, . . . we can see the suffering; it is the victory we

³ *Ibid.*, Pg. 25-26.

cannot see. We can walk down the corridors of hospitals and nursing homes, through the streets of cities, and across battlefields, and we can see, smell, and touch the suffering. It is the hope we cannot see.”⁴

Our second lesson today comes from the New Testament book of Hebrews, which is an early version of the Christian sermon. The preacher of these words faces an exhausted congregation. “They are tired – tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus.”⁵

“Their hands droop and their knees are weak, attendance is down at the church, and they are losing confidence. The threat to the congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. The threat here is that, worn down and worn out, they will drop their end of the rope and drift away. Tired of walking the walk, many of them are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith.”

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⁴ *Ibid.*, Pg. 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Pg. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Pg. 3.

And this, my friends, is why we worship. Were it not for the church, and for the weekly reminders to persevere, and to strive, and to hope, it would be far too easy to lose the faith. Far too easy to find something less demanding to do with our time on Sunday mornings. Far more tempting to pursue a path of obvious results.

Each week, we recommit ourselves to the shared, worship experience as a reminder that our “tangible experience is not the whole story.”⁷ For, indeed, “God speaks in the quietness of prayer and the noise of honest debate. God sometimes speaks in powerful moments of spiritual wonder and also in the seeming humdrum of committee meeting.”⁸ And today, through the singing of hymns, the hearing of scripture, and the word joyfully proclaimed, we are strengthened once more to enter a world that is often profane, and skeptical, and even dismissive regarding our hope in the resurrection.

When the organ soars, when the word resonates, when our public confession carries us forward, we remember that Jesus is the light of the world, and that the darkness will never overcome it. May it be so, and all thanks be to God for the journey ahead. Amen.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.