

The Devil's Under the Bed!

Luke 21:5-19

One of the . . . um, blessings of being a pastor is that you receive some interesting phone calls. I took a call the other day from a very agitated gentleman who insisted that the devil was under his bed. Literally, apparently!

The devil was under his bed and was attacking him whenever he got off the bed. I wasn't quite sure what to do with that information. Then the agitated gentleman insisted that I come and remove the devil from under his bed. This wasn't quite what I expected when I went to the office that morning! He then told me that he was the Son of God. Which in a strange way would make sense. I said the best thing I could do was to pray with him. Well . . . to that suggestion he unleashed a string of rather colourful, rather uncomplimentary words . . . words I'm pretty sure the Son of God wouldn't use . . . and he slammed down the phone . . . metaphorically at least.

Did I handle that right? I wondered.

Another phone call comes to mind. This was a couple of years ago . . . just before Christmas. I took a call from a very articulate gentleman. He said he wanted to talk to a pastor and ask some theological questions. Well, what he really wanted was to tell me his theological opinions . . . which for the next 40 minutes he proceeded to do! Occasionally he would pause and ask a challenging question as a pretext to start on another sermon. The longer he went on the more uncomfortable I became. Not because of how long the call was going but because even though I instinctively knew there were flaws in his argument, I didn't have any answers to his questions. His logic was impeccable. His ability to quote the Bible was amazing and I found myself saying again and again, "I don't know. I don't have an answer to your question"! Twenty years of being a pastor and that was the best I could come up with! "I don't know". A fine witness to the faith I was!

It was a bit embarrassing. Humiliating even. Why didn't God provide an angel to whisper the answers in my ear? Why didn't God give me a clever, logical, unarguable response? An answer that would have set him on the right path. More importantly, an answer that would have saved my blushes? After all, that's what Jesus said he'd do, isn't it? Well, at least that's what he said to his twelve disciples!

And, I know I wasn't testifying before kings and governors, but still!

Have you ever felt like that? Tongue tied? Self-conscious? Without answers? Not sure what to say when talking about your faith? Wishing you were better trained . . . better equipped . . . better prepared?

In today's text we get to listen in on a little chat Jesus has with his disciples . . . the twelve. It's a pretty sobering little chat. Jesus doesn't pull any punches . . . he gives it to them straight: "Listen up guys, this is what you have to look forward to . . . you will be arrested and persecuted. You will be brought before kings and governors because you're associated with me. But, that's good! Because it gives you

an opportunity . . . an opportunity to testify . . . about me! But, don't let it worry you . . . don't even try to defend yourself because I've got it in hand. I'll give you the wisdom . . . *my* wisdom . . . *my* mouth. Your testimony will be powerful because of me. And, by the way, you're going to be betrayed and put to death". Just like Jesus was!

Jesus didn't say that last bit . . . I put that in.

And, thus it came to pass. According to tradition Peter was crucified . . . upside down. James was killed by the sword. The other James was crucified. Andrew was crucified. Bartholomew was beheaded. So was Matthew. Just for something different, Simon was sawn in half. Thaddeus was killed with an axe. Thomas was impaled on sharpened stakes and Philip was crucified. Judas, of course, hung himself. Out of the twelve only the apostle John survived to old age and died peacefully rather than violently.

These were those who testified about Jesus.

But, here's the good news for you . . . in this text we get a *description* of what was to happen to the twelve, but it's not a *prescription* of what will happen to *all* disciples . . . or even most of them! I think we're pretty safe in leafy Malvern. But, what we *do* share in common with the twelve is that we, and all followers of Jesus, are witnesses . . . we testify to Jesus.

If you imagine how difficult that must have been for those first disciples . . . always under the threat of death. Or how difficult it must be for some Christians in our world today who *are* persecuted for their faith. If you can imagine that, then you would think that here in leafy Malvern where our lives are *not* threatened . . . you would think it would be the easiest thing in the world for us to do . . . to witness to Jesus.

But, it's not, is it? Why is it so hard? Why is it so hard to testify about Jesus? To speak about Jesus?

Well, I'm sure there are a lot of reasons, but I think they can be summed up with one idea . . . it is so hard to testify because we get in the way of Jesus. We get in the way. Our testimony becomes about us. We worry that we won't get it right . . . we won't say it right. Or, we have some preconceived notion of what testifying looks like . . . like you have to be a martyr or something!

Don't worry, the success or failure of the church doesn't depend on you! The success and failure of God's kingdom doesn't depend on you having the right words to say. The success or failure of God's kingdom depends on Jesus and Jesus is very much alive and at work in our world . . . through you . . . through us . . . through our witness.

So, if you bumble and stumble your way through a conversation about Jesus . . . if you miss an opportunity to share your faith . . . again . . . don't worry about it . . . it's not the end of the world, yet! These things will take place. There will be another opportunity . . . and another. And, it's not about you, anyway. Jesus promises to give us the wisdom. And, you know what Jesus' wisdom looks like, don't you? It looks weak . . . ineffective . . . it looks like a man crucified on a cross . . . but a man who, even as he hung dying on the cross, said to his disciple John, "Look after my mother"! Jesus' wisdom

is not spoken in powerful words, but through compassion and care. Jesus' wisdom moves people to forget about themselves and seek the good for others. Another word for that is love. That's the wisdom none of Jesus' opponents can withstand or overcome. They could crucify Jesus. They could put to death his disciples, but the witness is already made . . . the word is already out . . . love is in the world . . . love that is not self-seeking, but self-sacrificing . . . love that is all-encompassing and all-knowing. And, every single person in the world wants to be loved.

That's what we testify to, even in our hesitant, uncertain, stumbling way. And, maybe, in his wisdom, that's how God works best?

Remember that second phone call I told you about . . . the one where I came away feeling like a failure and a fraud for not knowing the answers? It *felt* like I'd just been crucified by a superior intellect. Shouldn't a pastor have the answers? But, when after 40 minutes the bloke finished all he had to say, he paused . . . it was like he was surprised . . . like he didn't know what to say next . . . and then he said: "Thank you. Thank you for listening. Thank you for taking me seriously. Thank you for not hanging up like many people do."

Perhaps me not having the answers was just what he needed. Perhaps it wasn't about me. Perhaps there's wisdom there.

Amen.

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