

**ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως**  
**Easter 2-A; 23 April 2017**  
**Epiphany Seattle**

*In nomine...*

This weekend we celebrate Memorial Day. Tomorrow is a day set aside to honor those who have defended our country in the military, and particularly those who have died. We honor men and women for whom the concept of freedom was so important, so sacred, that they were willing to die in order that others might enjoy that freedom. In order that you and I, sitting here today, might enjoy freedom.

We honor our veterans not just because of what we have received due to their sacrifices. We also honor them because they modeled a particular way of seeing life. Those who have fought and died for our country did so not because death was something they wished for. Instead, they set aside the fear of death and their wish to live in safety in order to be witnesses to the importance of freedom. They chose witness over wishes.

This past week we celebrated the Ascension of our Lord. After his resurrection and before his ascension, Jesus remained with his disciples 40 days. If they thought they were impressed with Jesus' power before his death, they were stunned by what they saw afterwards. Jesus lived again, but in Jesus' *new* life doors and barriers and distances meant nothing to him. Jesus had conquered space and time and death itself. Jesus had power.

As Jesus' time with his disciples drew to a close and Jesus was preparing them for the beginning of a new age in the life of God's people, the disciples asked Jesus the obvious question: They wanted to know what Jesus was going to do with his power. They asked, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?"

The disciples perceived that the age-old, intractable problem of peace in the Middle-East was now within Jesus' grasp to solve. It would be easy for Jesus to achieve a political solution and to back it up with unstoppable military might. The disciples were ready for Jesus to fulfill their fondest wish, the wish of their fathers, and the wish of *their* fathers before them.

But Jesus' answer to his disciples was unexpected. Jesus chose witness over wishes.

First Jesus said, "What God is up to is a lot bigger than this little wish of yours. Israel at peace with its neighbors? Israel a dominating force in Middle-East politics? Yes, that could happen, but God has bigger plans, better plans." Then Jesus told the disciples their part in God's plans: "You will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The process of metamorphosis began when Jesus called his disciples to leave their fishing boats, their tax-collection booths, their fig trees, or wherever else they were. This metamorphosis was drawing towards its fulfillment. The Holy Spirit was coming, said Jesus, and she will give you *power*. With that power, you will change the world. But you will not change it by fulfilling *wishes*. You will change it with your *witness*.

When Jesus was walking around this earth 2000 years ago, Jesus had power to heal anyone he wanted. He could calm raging seas and probably summon rain clouds during a drought. Jesus could fix things. He could make wishes come true. But Jesus wasn't in the business of wish-fulfillment. Jesus had bigger things to do, a mission of even broader scope. Jesus' mission was to leave such an impact on the world that it still reverberates even today from pole to pole, from east to west, all around the globe. Jesus' witness was about the love of God for all people, no matter what. Jesus came as a witness to that love, and it was *that testimony* that got Jesus killed. Jesus wasn't killed for making wishes come true. He was killed for his witness.

Power comes to us in lots of different forms. Power might come in the guise of positional authority, physical strength, or a cultural inheritance of privilege. Power might come to us as a comely appearance, a useful political alliance, or as money. But the ways we use power tend to be pretty consistent. Power is most often used for wish-fulfillment: we use power to get what we want, when we want it, how we want it.

The power the disciples received was not power for their own wish-fulfillment. It was not power that would protect them from hunger, persecution, or lynching. Quite the opposite, their power and their testimony as witnesses eventually did result in many of them dying much like Jesus did: violent deaths at the hands of politicians who felt threatened. But like the fallen soldiers we remember this weekend, they found death a small price to pay in order that others might hear of the love of God. Disciples and soldiers: they both chose witness over wishes.

The primary calling of Jesus' Holy-Spirit-empowered disciples is to be witnesses. Their power lies in their capacity to tell others about their encounter with Jesus. Our power lies in our capacity to proclaim the good news of God's love for all people. Witness, not wishes, is the key to eternal life.

Every person in this room has been endowed by our Creator with amazing power. Some power is obvious and might even receive cultural recognition like those with power for healing or for lawyering. Some power is more subtle, not as widely acclaimed. But in the Kingdom of God, every single one of us is powerful and important. God's Spirit is working inside of each of us to accomplish God's will in creation.

The interesting question is, do you use your power for wishes or for witness? Is your principle purpose in exercising your power the pursuit of money, fame, prestige or respect? Or do you exercise your power primarily in order to witness to God's love for those whom you serve from day to day? What does using your power to demonstrate God's love look like in your life?

Every day I pray to God about my wishes. I have a lot of wishes. I wish many things for myself, for my family, for my church and friends and colleagues. I wish things for our city, our country, and all the countries of the world. I make my wishes known to God because God invites me to entrust my concerns to God's care. There's nothing wrong with uttering wishes.

But interestingly, I don't generally find that God has given me power to resolve those things I pray about. I feel helpless in the face of most of my wishes. The *power* God has given *me* is to

be a witness. I strive to testify to the love of God in the ways I care for and show affection to my family. I strive to be a witness to the love of God for all people in the ways I see and speak about and interact with the world around me.

On Thursday the whole church celebrated the Ascension of our Lord. Tomorrow we in the United States will celebrate Memorial Day. Next Sunday, the entire church will celebrate Pentecost, the completion of the Easter season and in recognition of the Holy Spirit who still gives Christ's church new power for service and witness.

What power have you received from God? How do you put it to use? What is *your* witness?

## **Sermon Questions**

1. How is wish-fulfillment a factor in your life of faith?
2. What spiritual practices have helped your metamorphosis from a focus on wish-fulfillment to a life of witness?
3. How does your life testify to the love of God for others?