What Kind of Witness is Ours?

In her novel Evensong, set in the western mountains of North Carolina, Gail Godwin includes the story of a visiting professor who worships in an Episcopal congregation, always sitting in the back pew, pulpit side, during the sparsely-attended early Sunday morning service. Though uncertain about the role of faith in his own life, he comes, intrigued by the faith of a fellow scientist who has had significant impact upon his life. Some mornings the visitor engages the pastor and perhaps a few other worshipers in brief conversation; other Sunday mornings, he slips out quietly. On one particular Sunday the professor merely passes a scrap of paper into the pastor’s hand, on which is recorded some local lore about Chief Drowning Bear, who in the early 1800s encouraged his people to hold firmly to the old Cherokee ways, including their religion. On one occasion, according to tradition, the chief allowed a Christian missionary to read several chapters of the Bible to him. After the missionary had finished, Chief Drowning Bear reportedly remarked, “It seems to be a good book—strange that the white people are not better, after having had it so long.”

One can be little surprised by the chief’s sharp and even bitter musings, considering that so many Cherokees were soon to be forced off their lands, making the trek historians label “the Trail of Tears” to lands west of the Mississippi. As we ponder this morning’s
question, “What kind of witness is ours?” Chief Drowning Bear’s observations serve as a powerful reminder that it is never enough merely to read—or to speak—words of faith. Rather, those words need to impact our character, our relationships, our way of living. The bit of ancient lore related in Evensong about Chief Drowning Bear does not tell us the specific Scriptures read to him, but the chief’s response underscores how critical it is that people who hold writings of faith to be important come to reflect something of the nature and the spirit of the God to whom those scriptures point.

Tom Long, one of this year’s Annual Conference preachers and the leader for the Brethren Ministers’ Association pre-Conference workshop, in his book Testimony reminds us that the purpose of worship is not only that we be inspired; much more, genuine worship is to lead to our transformation. Vital worship, writes Tom Long, “is about vision and hearing . . . [it] gives us new eyes and ears, a new set of lenses to look at the world, a new vocabulary allowing us to listen afresh . . . To see and hear differently is to live differently, to have the ways we think and feel, make decisions and act as Christians transformed” (Testimony, p. 41).

What kind of witness is ours? Kent Nerburn is an artist and author who wrote a book, Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace, based upon the familiar prayer of Francis of Assisi. In his chapter on the closing affirmation of that prayer, “It is in dying that we are born to eternal life,” Nerburn reminds us,

Our lives are our witness, and our witness is our legacy. It is what lives on in the world after we are gone. If our witness is to selfishness, our eternal legacy is one of selfishness. If our witness is to love and kindness and the best of the
human heart, it is that which will live on in the hearts of others after we are gone.

Nerburn is writing about the kind of legacy we leave after death—whether we leave behind us an afterglow of light and peace, selfless love and servanthood, generosity and gratitude, or whether we leave a trail of selfishness and fear, darkness and greed. But we don’t need to be facing death in order to consider our legacy. Indeed, whatever the impetus for change, transition times offer significant opportunity to reflect upon the message our lives convey—both our individual lives and our life together as a community of faith.

As I walk through these final weeks of pastoring Highland Avenue Church, I find myself questioning my legacy. Truth be told, it’s not something I can determine for myself. Instead, it’s a question that can best be answered by those who have known me, those with whom I have been in relationship—the congregations I have served, the communities in which I have lived, my family and the significant persons in my life. You may remember the story of the Brethren preacher in the early 20th century who was questioned by an exuberant proponent of the faith, “Brother, are you saved?” “Well now,” came the preacher’s response, “I suggest you check in with my neighbors, or perhaps head over to the town center and ask the residents gathered there whether they see the Spirit of Christ reflected in my living. You might want to inquire of my family members, and the congregation I serve.” It was the preacher’s way of reminding his questioner that our witness and legacy, our faith and our salvation—all this is measured, not simply by reciting proper words of faith, but much more, by our fruit-bearing, by the quality of our living.
What kind of witness is ours? Centuries before Jesus, the prophet Amos was direct and uncompromising in his call for the ancient Israelites to mend their living, to let “justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). Amos was not a trained theologian nor a polished leader, but rather, in the words of today’s lesson from Amos 7, “a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees” (7:14) who heard God’s call to journey from his home in the southern kingdom of Judah to the northern realm of Israel. The prophet begins his ministry in Israel by proclaiming harsh words of judgment against Israel’s neighbors, indicting Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab.

No doubt his hearers in Israel were heartened as the prophet condemned their hostile neighbors, even as Amos then moves on to speak of his own countrymen in Judah. But the people’s pleasure turns to dismay as Amos continues on, now speaking words directly to Israel itself. “Thus says the Lord,” Amos cries out. “For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the heads of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way . . .” (2:6-7).

The prophet goes on to point the finger at Israel’s leadership, both King Jeroboam and his associates, as well as priests and other spiritual leaders, so much so that in today’s text Amaziah, one of the court “prophets,” accuses Amos of treason. Amaziah cries out against Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom” (7:12-13).
Is our thirst for peace so adamant, our hunger for justice so apparent, our passion for a spirituality that links abiding personal faith and social transformation so direct, our expression of God’s welcoming embrace for all manner of people so clear, our prayer for the coming of that day when swords are beaten into plowshares so unwavering, that, as did Amos, we encounter resistance and opposition to our message and our witness?

Centuries after the days of Amos, as the early church was developing, early believers in Jesus struggled to hold fast to their new-found faith in the face of increasing resistance and even persecution. Indeed, some biblical scholars would suggest that this is the power of today’s lesson from Matthew, chapter 14, the familiar story of Jesus walking on water. According to the Gospel writer, Jesus has just fed a crowd of thousands. Seeking a quiet place for reflection and prayer, Jesus dismisses the crowds and urges the small band of disciples to get into a boat and make their way to the other side of the lake. Strong winds arise, so that, battered by waves, the boat is far from the shore when the disciples see what they assume to be a ghost walking on the water. Not surprisingly, they cry out in fear, but the assuring voice of Jesus comes to them, saying, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” (Matthew 14:27).

As they encountered resistance, was not the plight of the early church similar to that of the disciples in their boat, being battered by waves? And yet, in the very midst of apparent chaos those early Christians were experiencing come the comforting words of Jesus, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Someone has suggested that we hear this frequent admonition in Scripture, “Do not be afraid;” “fear not,” precisely because fear is
such on ongoing reality in our lives. Who among us does not find it intimidating to face the kind of opposition Amos encountered from the competing prophet Amaziah and his cohorts, or the kind of resistance the early church encountered as it sought to take seriously the upside-down teachings of Jesus that call us to embody the ways of mercy and compassion, justice and peace, nonviolence and loving servanthood, gracious welcome and abundant generosity? Who among us does not find ourselves praying with the hymn writer, “When the storms of life are raging . . . in the midst of tribulation . . . in the midst of persecution, stand by me . . . When the world is tossing me, like a ship upon the sea, thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me” (Hymnal, #558).

Peter, hearing the words of Jesus arising out of the turbulent waters, pointedly requests, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” (Matthew 14:28). For a few moments Peter finds himself making his way toward Jesus; his is a model of obedient discipleship, as long as Peter keeps his eyes fixed on Jesus. But as soon as Peter diverts his attention from Jesus to the storms raging around him, fear takes over and Peter begins to sink. In similar fashion, the early church, some years later, found itself haunted by fear and tempted to turn away from the hard teachings of Jesus. These days, we may not find ourselves challenged to walk on water, but is it any easier to hold fast to the call of living Christ’s way of peace in a world of violence and terror, of proclaiming Christ’s call to justice in a world far more prone to division and oppression, of modeling Christ’s gracious welcome in a world marked by suspicion and fear?
What kind of witness is ours? It’s a question each of us must consider individually, but also a question for our congregation to ponder as well. What kind of legacy do we leave in this community, as we seek to be a place to deepen faith, proclaim peace, embrace community, welcome others, and serve our neighbor, in the compassionate spirit of Jesus? Where will we be led when we take seriously the encouraging words of Jesus, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid”? As members of a tradition, the Church of the Brethren, who have long spoken of ourselves as “a people of the Book,” how shall our living reflect the character of the God of compassion and untold grace, the God of peace and overflowing goodness, to whom the Scriptures point?

What kind of witness is ours? May God grant us wisdom and courage to live as instruments of God’s peace, proclaimers of God’s hope, embodiments of God’s light and joy, forgiveness and grace. Amen.