

Words and A Wisdom

Isaiah 12

Luke 21: 5-19

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Isaiah 12

You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Luke 21: 5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

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Well it's finally happened. I was always concerned this would happen some day and it has. I literally have nothing to say here this morning. I've read the biblical texts, studied them, reflected on them, but really just have nothing to say. There's just no sermon muse this week. So I have no words, I have nothing to say. Instead we'll just move on from this awkward moment.....

Just as it was odd to hear those words, they were certainly odd to say, and it is not just because ministers always have something to say.

When we are in worship we gather to hear and to receive the good news of God, and there is always good news to be shared. And the pastor in the pulpit is certainly not the only one

sharing that good news. It's in the greetings and the welcome we offer to one another. It's in the prayers we offer up for others, in the offering we give that supports our ways of outreach, it's in the hymns we sing and the bread and cup we share.

Jesus said, "I will give you words and a wisdom," so that the words, the truth, of God are always ready and available to be put out there—directly or indirectly.

Many of you have shared the truth of that experience with me, an experience that happens all the time in churches, as the pastor is thanked for something meaningful and personal said in the sermon or prayers, for words that were just what needed to be heard. But then, going back and looking at the document, the heard words are *not* there. Or going on our Facebook page to listen again, and the words heard are not there either. Yet you received the words and wisdom of God that you needed in that particular moment. The words and the wisdom you needed were given, were said, to you.

"The days will come," Jesus said. The days, the end times, the part of our faith story that we know of yet very rarely think about. It's just not where our focus goes. But Jesus' words sound as if he is watching and hearing the same news reports that we read these days as we hear of false prophets claiming they are working for good but are instead working for greed, and of wars and insurrections in Ukraine, and the lesser known yet equally brutal wars in Ethiopia and the Congo. Over and over nations and kingdoms rise against one another. Earthquakes, famines and plagues are frequent news stories.

But then a curious thing happens. In the midst of this dark and somber future, Jesus says to "not be terrified." We are not to dwell on these adversities, to huddle in fear or to outright run away from reality, but to instead know that he is with us. "For I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair on your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." It is in exactly these days that we know God is our strength and might, our salvation. Knowing this is how with joy we draw water from the wells of salvation.

When we hear Jesus' words to us through Luke's gospel we hear of the hardships and hatred and rejection in the name of Jesus Christ in the faithful biographies of our ancient faith ancestors. Jesus told his followers that when they would be arrested and persecuted, when they faced the authorities and the trials of the synagogue leaders, the courts and prisons, the kings and governors, even when their families and friends rejected and hated them because of Jesus, because of their beliefs and faith practices, he would be with them and give them words and the wisdom needed. He would give them the spiritual resources they needed—words and wisdom that could not be refuted. He gave them hope for the endurance they needed.

In our time and culture this is an experience that most of us will never know first-hand, yet even today millions of Christians around the world do face a threat similar to that of the first disciples. In Pakistan, Sudan, China, North Korea, and some other countries, followers of Jesus are routinely arrested for their Christian activities, for making God's deeds known, and singing praises to the Lord. They face charges that often carry capital penalties.

So this is not just a history lesson for us. Although few of us will actually be arrested for our faith, we just might find ourselves standing in other "courts" when we stand up for social justice, for the rights of equity in all its diversity, and for our religious beliefs among others who do not believe or act as we do. Our lives will not be at risk, we will not suffer physical pain, but we will struggle and work and know emotional distress as we bear witness to the life and the lessons that Jesus lived and modeled. The promise of Jesus, that God will give us the right words to say, encourages us to be bold and clear, yet also humble. We do not speak as if we were God,

but we will speak in the confidence that God is with us, guiding and helping us to proclaim the truth without fear or doubt.

Just a few months ago we heard that UCC Zimbabwe church leaders were being arrested and detained for their Christian beliefs and practices. We held them in prayer and reached out to them through our What's App. Luckily it all turned out to be a hoax, yet we know the reality that lurks as a very real possibility for them as they live and worship under that threatening shadow as they work against numerous human rights violations across the country.

And on Tues night the two week old beautiful rainbow sign in front of the Westmoreland United Church of Christ was vandalized. The plexiglass cover was spraypainted with a Confederate flag and also the number 1488 which is a white supremacist code. It appeared that it was not the work of a particular hate group but a random act by someone leaving the nearby election polling location. The response of the church was prayer and to have the damage to the sign repaired; to turn vandalism and harassment into an opportunity to testify to the love of Jesus Christ. But then on Wed they were again vandalized. The sign which reads: diversity, love, life, sunlight and serenity was defaced with racist and homophobic slurs. Their response is to have a vigil this Tues for the community to gather to testify to the love of Jesus Christ. That is the word and the wisdom of the One who knows us all as created in the image of God and taught us to do the same.

As we listen for Jesus' words and wisdom, Proverbs in the Message translation of the bible offers this guidance: Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track. Amen.