



July 19 - Witness

As many of you know, my pastoral internship took place in San Bernardino, California. The context was quite different than Iowa. The area around the mission was a really rough neighborhood. There was a lot of gang violence. There were shootings every night. There was a heavy police presence, and, unfortunately, that meant a lot of police harassment.

Please know as I tell this story that I am NOT anti-police. Like with any profession, there are a select few that make a bad name for others. In San Bernardino, there was a hostile attitude toward the work of Central City Lutheran Mission. The youth often got jaywalking tickets and were even handcuffed while the officers wrote the ticket.

The mission hosted a “Know Your Rights” workshop. It was very well attended. There was an undercover officer who was denied entry and that did not go over well. In hindsight, they really should not have sent a white guy in khakis to a meeting in a part of town that was less than 1 percent white.

After the workshop, I was driving several of the youth home. Some lived far enough away that they had to take buses to get to the mission and we would offer rides home in the big 15 passenger church van. As I was driving to the various houses I noticed a pattern. There would be a police car that would follow for about 4-5 blocks and then turn while another officer began to follow. Police car after police car shuffled behind the van while I dropped kids off.

As I was alone driving back to the mission, I knew it was just a matter of time. Once I turned onto the street where the mission was, I was pulled over. Something came over me. I rolled the windows down and began to start shouting, drawing a crowd. The officer was less than happy at my response, and I really thought I was getting arrested. Yet, I felt compelled to witness to all that I had seen and heard.

The prophet is reminded Israel to be witnesses of the work of Yahweh. This passage starts with an image of God that should make us all a little uncomfortable. God is reminding the people of who God is, the King of Israel, the Redeemer, the first and last. There is no other god. Period. That may seem like a no brainer until we dig into the context a little bit.

These words are spoken in the middle of the exile in Babylon. You have heard some of these stories. Daniel and the den of lions took place in Babylon. His friends, Meshack, Shadrack, and Abednego went into the fiery furnace because they refused to worship a king. We have heard the stories of those who tried to cling to faith in the midst of an oppressive empire. We do not like to think of it that way, but the empire becomes its own god. The focus is drawn to what feeds the empire, how to expand it, how to create uniformity, and the silence of differing opinions.

When the prophet says “Do not fear” it is as if the prophet is speaking to us, here and now, in the face of the empire. There are those who would like to equate God to nation. There are those who would like to place civil leaders as the sole voice of truth. There are those who stand against anyone who wishes to worship the God of love and inclusion.

Our witness does not have to be as obnoxious as me yelling about getting pulled over. In fact, I do not recommend yelling during a traffic stop. The truth is that our witness is made by being true to our beliefs and our faith. Our witness may mean a willingness to pray before a meal while out in public. It may mean gently telling a family member that you have a different understanding of God. It may mean going out of your way to greet someone who appears different from you.

May our living differently through Christ be a witness to all those we encounter. Do not fear. Live your faith. Amen.