

“The Way of the Word”

Isaiah 55:6-11

Matthew 27:15-23

This morning, we’re continuing our sermon series of visions from the Bible. We started with Daniel – a righteous hero in exile seeing a vision of the end times. Then we got a sneak peak at King David’s eager plans to build the Temple that were redirected when the prophet Nathan had a vision from God. Then we had a fast forward to the time of the early church when the Apostle Peter dreamed of a sheet coming down from heaven, giving him a new revelation.

Did you notice what these people all have in common? Okay, yes, they’re all men...but there’s something else, too. They’re all people of faith – already believing in God, already striving to follow the word that God sent them for their time and their place. But this morning’s vision is different. Pilate’s wife is a woman, a gentile, a wealthy person, someone with a lofty social status. She is about as far opposite these other guys as you can get! And we just have this one verse that mentions her dream. It doesn’t come up in any other Gospel and we don’t know what became of her after this.

There are many legends in the church about Pilate’s wife, but nothing we can nail down for sure. She is often called Claudia Procula so I’ll refer to her as Claudia for this sermon. We don’t know if Claudia was a religious person or if she’d ever heard a single word of scripture or if she knew a thing about this man from Galilee. Yet, she has this dream about Jesus – that he was innocent. But, more than innocent, he was righteous – he was just. She had to lift up her voice to Pilate. Had she ever done such a thing before? Was it dangerous for her to challenge him or try to influence him? Would he care the she suffered for concern over this innocent man whose life hung in the balance?

Perhaps one might also wonder...why? Why would God speak to this woman? Was she like Mary – already favored by God, blessed among women, prepared for the task to come? Or was she enfolded in her wealth and status, hair done up, covered in jewels, bathed in perfume, removed from the woes of the people, but speaking up simply because her dream had become an annoyance to her? Why Claudia? And why would God send this dream if Jesus was meant to die? If Jesus came to give his life for our salvation and nothing that humanity could do would stop God's ultimate plan of love and grace, mercy and abundant, abundant pardon....why would God warn Claudia in a dream?

Whatever her motives, whatever her personality, Claudia heard what was right and she spoke up. It didn't change anything, but she still spoke. It reminds me of the Nazi resistance group – the “White Rose.” The group was made up of college students and one of their professors. They believed that Hitler was harming the soul of Germany, that political and religious freedom were essential, that the persecution of Jews and everyone else the Nazis didn't like – that that was utterly wrong. They wrote leaflets and flyers and mailed them all over the place so they were harder to trace. They drew from every source and authority they could think of to sway the hearts and minds of the people – the Bible, Aristotle, Goethe – voices from the prophets, from philosophers, from German heroes all warning the people that the Nazi way was the wrong way. As their organization grew, they distributed thousands of these leaflets in cities across Germany and Austria.

They wanted to awaken the conscience of the people so that they would throw off their oppressive government. The first leaflet said, “it is certain that today every honest German is ashamed of his government. Who among us has any conception of the dimensions of shame that will befall us and our children when one day the veil has fallen from our eyes and the most

horrible of crimes – crimes that infinitely outdistance every human measure – reach the light of day?”ⁱ

They had been careful to avoid detection by the Gestapo even while spreading their message of resistance to the Nazis. Two members of the group, Hans and Sophie Scholl, were students at the university in Munich. On February 18, 1943, they brought hundreds of their leaflets to school to pass out while classes were in session. They decided to throw them down from a third floor balcony so that everyone who passed through that common area below might see and read their message of resistance. But they were seen by a maintenance worker who reported them to the Gestapo. Hans and Sophie tried to blend in with the crowd of students as classes let out, but it was too late. He had seen them, he knew which ones they were, and they were caught. As they were interrogated, they confessed that only they two were involved in the White Rose. They hoped to save the lives of the rest of their group, but Hans had a paper in his pocket that led the Gestapo to their friend and fellow resister, Christoph. One by one, the Nazis tracked down each member of their group.

They were tried, but their parents weren't permitted to attend. Sophie defended their actions vigorously in court. She said, “somebody, after all, had to make a start. What we wrote and said is also believed by many others. They just don't dare express themselves as we did.”ⁱⁱ She had dropped leaflets at the university on February 18th and on February 22nd she was executed.

Claudia spoke up to Pilate and Jesus died just the same. Hans and Sophie and the rest of the White Rose spoke out to the German people and told the world that what was happening was wrong – and yet the Nazis continued their campaign of totalitarian oppression and retaliation for several years after that.

The prophet Isaiah charges us to seek the Lord because the way of wickedness and the way of unrighteousness are the wrong way. These deeds, these thoughts are not absolute or final and God is forever calling us to return again, return again to the way of righteousness. God is a God of mercy, of compassion – God cherishes us and calls us home all our lives. Then we hear God speaking in Isaiah, “my thoughts are not your thoughts nor are your ways my ways.” We do not and cannot understand the thoughts of God, the ways of God, the God’s eye view on all creation. But...but we find that God is holding everything together. God tells us that when rain falls on the earth, it gets to the earth. When trees and plants and oceans and streams receive that water, it brings life and growth and hope for tomorrow. The rain and the snow that come from God’s hands make our food possible – they make our everything possible.

So, God tells us that the word that comes from God’s mouth doesn’t return empty. God’s word has a job to do and a purpose and it succeeds in that purpose. Here it is revealed that sent by God means God’s will is fulfilled. But where does that leave us with Claudia who spoke and changed nothing? Where does that leave us with Hans and Sophie and all the rest of the White Rose who stood against injustice and were hastily executed by the unjust state? How was God’s word fulfilled when they each seem to have failed in their efforts to challenge the evil they saw around them?

There is some uncertainty about what exactly Sophie Scholl’s last words were. Many sources say that as she faced the end of her life, she said this: “such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go...What does my death matter, if through us, thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Sometimes...sometimes I think that we don’t really know how to understand the way of God’s word. It doesn’t conform to our expectations and it doesn’t always make for a neat and

tidy fairy tale ending. Say you were making up the story of Sophie Scholl and the White Rose, for example. I bet they would come together, figure out that Nazis were bad, write their leaflets, build support, face their execution, and then get rescued at the last minute and take down the Nazis, right?

But that's not what happened. They spoke out as they were called to do and even as they were about to be killed, they trusted that speaking out for what is right was the right thing to do even if they had to give their lives for it. In our everyday lives, it's hard to fathom this level of hope and confidence and trust in righteousness. The White Rose went to their deaths, though innocent. We remember that Jesus told us that there was no greater love than to lay down one's life for your friends.

Jesus taught this and so he himself went to the cross. He covers us with his innocence and that innocence erodes every wickedness, all evil, all marks of sin in this world. The shame of the cross became glory for every child of God because God's word has a way so much higher than our ways – so much more profound than what we could create for ourselves or give to ourselves.

The thing about these visions and dreams – the thing about these heroic disciples of Christ in any age – is that their words and their actions continue to speak to us long after their deaths. Through them, God's word still lives and moves, awake and alive. We hear Sophie Scholl urging us to be awake and stirred to action. We hear Claudia reminding us that even from the seat of power, even from the most unlikely source – anyone and everyone could see that Jesus was innocent. If the word of God reaches from the poorest oppressed guy up to the loftiest, wealthy lady, surely we should take notice – surely we can see the awe and the wonder of the Eternal One in human form, blameless, yet offering everything so we might be freed for new life.

My friends, the way of the word is wild and free. Inspiration never dies – the word finds new life in each soul that it touches. It is not for us to live in endless worry about whether we got the outcomes we wanted or when bad things will end or why our chosen/favorite method didn't quite work out. There is so much we do not know and will never know. We can desire to know without being consumed by that desire. At the frayed edges of our understanding – even there we find God working. And so we must hold on to this revelation from scripture: God's word isn't empty; it's unexpected, it's vibrant, it's miraculous! So, we carry on - repenting, trusting in the power of Christ's saving love, and living lives of justice and goodness. With God's grace, Christ's example, and the Spirit's leading, we can follow in faith. Amen.

ⁱ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/White_Rose

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Sophie_Scholl

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