Ways to Keep the Faith When the World Seems Wicked

struggle to find things for which to pray. That is OK. Today may be a time to sit in God’s presence and listen. If you are looking for someone to pray with or for you, be sure to check out The Upper Room Living Prayer Center.

Get some exercise. Take a walk around your neighborhood. Get on your treadmill. Take a class at your local YMCA. Moving your muscles releases endorphins that help you feel good.

Indulge beauty around you. We need beauty and goodness in our lives each day. Recently, there was a trend on Facebook where people shared pictures of flowers to add beauty to what they felt was a barrage of negativity. Find your beauty — flowers, art, music, etc. — and insert it into your day.

Take a break. We live in an age where we can stay connected to the news constantly. Be sure to get away from it for a period of time. Turn off the alerts on your computer or smartphone, and do something else. There will be plenty of news when you return.

As John Wesley preached, “Against hope, believe in hope! It is your Father’s good pleasure yet to renew the face of the earth. Surely all these things shall come to an end, and the inhabitants of the earth shall learn righteousness.” (Wesley, John. “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” 2.” III.18). In the midst of all we are hearing, we believe in hope.

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Bible Study

September 6, 2015
Text: Acts 4:23-31

After Peter and John were released from prison and from heavy-duty questioning by some of the religious authorities, they “return to the brothers and sisters…” (Acts 4:23). That’s not surprising, is it? No matter how strongly we witness to our faith in a non-believing world, there comes a time when we want the power and assurance of being with others of the faith. Being Christian is not a lone-star sport!

The gathered Church community prayed that they might speak and live with boldness (NRSV), with complete confidence (CEB), fearlessly (Phillips), with freedom (ENT), courageously (Williams), and frankly (Strong). That doesn’t sound like the prayer of a people who were going into hiding (Acts 4:29, 31).

So, it seems clear that we are to proclaim loudly and frequently and clearly about Jesus. But, wait a minute! After Jesus healed a man with a skin disease, he told him “Don’t say anything to anyone…” (Matthew 8:4). Once after a crowd had seen Jesus help a deaf man to hear and speak, Jesus “commanded the people not to tell anyone” (Mark 3:8-6). Then, there was the time Jesus restored life to a child whose parents thought she was dead. Our Lord’s parting words were: “to tell no one what had happened” (Luke 8:56).

So, what are we to do? On the one hand, Jesus is saying “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) and on the other hand, Jesus is saying “tell no one what had happened” (Luke 8:56). Maybe one handle for picking up this dilemma is the very prayer offered in this week’s study text, a prayer for the courage, confidence, and fearlessness (Acts 4:29) to speak. That means we pray for the wisdom and confidence and courage to know how to speak (and live) for our Lord. When the Holy Spirit filled them (Acts 4:31), they spoke with confidence. That does not mean that what they said and did in every circumstance was exactly the same. It meant that they trusted God to lead them to speak with what was right for a particular situation.

What Someone Else Has Said:
Paul Scott Wilson (Preaching as Poetry, Abingdon Press) has written: “Fresh, faithful proclamation requires imagination and creative engagement of the Bible and our world.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Holy Spirit, stir… calm…”

September 13, 2015
Text: Acts 4:34-5:10

The account of Ananias and Sapphira is one of the most bizarre stories in the Book of Acts. They dropped dead after lying about a gift to the Church. Hmmmm.

My favorite story—sorry, I can’t resist—about this incident is in Bishop Roy Short’s History of the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church (Abingdon). In telling about Bishop Warren Candler, Bishop Short wrote: “On one occasion, when preaching at the Louisville Conference, Bishop Candler was talking about Ananias and Sapphira. He said, ‘Some folks say God killed Ananias and Sapphira for lying. God don’t kill people for lying. If he did, where would I be?’ When the laughter subsided, he added, ‘Standing up here, all by myself, with a house full of corpses and nobody to help me carry them out.’”

We laugh at this because we know that everyone—except, perhaps, you, me, and Bishop Candler!—has, to some degree, the “gift” of exaggeration, underestimation, bold-faced untruth, lying through our teeth, misrepresentation, pretension, deception, judging on truth, omission/commission, false humility, lack of candor—well, you get the idea.

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was not that they withheld some money from the community pot. Their sin was that they were deceptive about it.

Our sin separates us from God. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23); we just don’t expect it to be as specific as this! No wonder temptation and dread seized the whole church!” (Acts 4:11) when word
of this episode began to spread.

Maybe Bishop Candler was right: “God don’t kill people for lying.” But our lack of integrity is a sign of the death of our spirit. Opening ourselves to the crushing power of our Lord’s resurrection, we can find the fresh start that Ananias and Sapphira chose not to accept. Confession of sin opens the door for the breeze of the Holy Spirit’s cleansing power.

What Someone Else Has Said: In The Ten Commandments (Orbis Books), Sister Joan Christin wrote: “Lying is what makes us suspect in everything else in life. It isn’t that truth is rewarded; it is that truth needs no reward. Truth is its own reward; it requires no memory, no elaborate explanations, no conquering confederates, and no fear of exposure. When we lie about the other, it is the sign that there is something we do not like about ourselves. Something’s missing. Something isn’t right.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of the Way, the Truth, and the Life, clear me of the shadow places in my life...”

September 20, 2015

September 27, 2015

Text: Acts 2:17; 10, 17, 33-34, 44, 8; 13:1

Here is the story of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. So far, so good. It is an account of faithfulness, courage, and all the qualities we admire in martyrs. So far, so good. Hooray for them! But there is an “oops” in this account. The word we translate “martyr” is martra. Guess how that word can also be translated: “Witness.” In the New Testament language the word “martyr” and the word “witness” are one and the same. Oops, indeed. I probably don’t feel called to be a martyr, but how is that different from being called to witness?

One thing I notice in these verses about Stephen’s great testimony before he is stoned to death is the direction Stephen faces as he speaks. He is not talking about his physical direction—north, east, south, west; I am speaking of the direction of his journey. Here is a man who is facing death and who is ready to claim the heavenly victory God will give him (Acts 7:59). But notice how Stephen spends those last minutes: looking back.


During this past week when I re-called so strongly the burial of my beloved Toni four years ago, I was eager to make claim upon the tomorrow God will give. But, in Stephen’s witness (his martyrdom), there is a call to trace the entire journey. It is the presence of God in that journey that gives us the possibility of saying with Stephen, “Lord Jesus, accept my life” (Acts 7:59).

The witness is not just what God has done in my life. God’s grace has promised to do in my life after death. The witness is of One who has faithfully moved among His people to bring grace, forgiveness, covenant, and victory. Looking back, I say “Thanks be to God.” Such is my witness about tomorrow.

What Someone Else Has Said: In Grace Matter (Josselyn-Bass), Chris Rice speaks of a friend: “Then John used a phrase he’d never used before: ‘The way you grew into God’s love isn’t by making demands of each other, he said. ‘You do it by giving each other grace.’ ... He was talking about our undeserved love for each other ... Giving each other grace is looking at people through God’s eyes.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of surprises, God of grace...”

TEXT: Acts 2:7-3:1; 10, 17, 33-34, 44, 8; 13:1

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Phillip Cristh was sent to Wilmington in 2013 with a God-given dream to reach those who had been “turned off by the church, neglected by the church, and indifferent toward the church.” The result? A new faith community called The Anchor.

The Anchor has had a nomadic life as it reaches those beyond church walls, worshiping in local pubs, in homes and on “The Barge” along Wilmington’s waterfront. “We believe in going where the people are, not expecting them to always come to us,” says Phillip.

Now it’s time for The Anchor to find a home. This Fall they will be securing a permanent worship space with a

$50,000 grant from Impact10. While they are still committed to going where the people are, a home base will allow them to anchor many of their ministries and grow a more impacting mission into community. The Anchor is going, making disciples of Jesus Christ and transforming their world in the margins. “What else could we be,” says Rev. Cristh, “but what this community needs the most in a stormy world? A place where Christ can be the “anchor of our soul.”

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