

# Our Testimony

January 20, In the Year of Our LORD, 2008

Gates Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 49:1-7, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 and John 1:29-42

Every once in a while, there is a moment, when I really *get* it. A flush starts with my cheeks and makes its way back to the nape of my neck and I actually shudder. Oh, don't get me wrong, I always *believe* it – it is just that there are moments when I *really* get it. It? By “it,” I mean my faith in Jesus the Christ, the Lamb of God, the One Who redeems and saves all of us. By “really get it,” I mean those fleeting moments when my humanity doesn't get in the way, when none of my naturally sinful nature obstructs the absolute, unquestioned truth of the Gospel. I realize I am admitting that most of the time I don't completely get it – but you are not hearing me unless you recognize that by “getting it,” I mean *absolute clarity* – and in admitting that absolute clarity is rare, I stand in pretty good company, for there many figures in the Bible and throughout history admit how their human nature clouded or clouds that which is Divine.

The two most recent opportunities to “get it,” were in this sanctuary – and both were during memorial services – the first was during a service for one who died all too young and the second for one who enjoyed a good long life. Last year, “it” happened in November at an incredibly precious moment during the gathering and service celebrating the life of Ryan Simm. Omar Rouchon was singing. Omar acknowledges that it was by the grace of God that he was able to do that in a service for his good friend, Ryan. For me, “it” happened at the point in the solo, “I'm Going to Build a Mountain” when Omar, accompanied by Kris Ohman on the piano, completed the solemn, almost doleful first part of that song – and there was that pause – an incredible pause – probably much longer in my memory than was actually the case – and the piece and the mood changed – from slow to fast, from solemn to celebratory, ... almost as though God, through that incredible music, was inviting us to move from sorrow and loss to joy, from focusing on Ryan's death to his being in heaven with God and in the bosom of Abraham. I will *never* forget that moment – for once again, the flush came over me – and I “got it” as in “really *got* it.” – this redemption and salvation and resurrection “stuff” was no mere vision or dream or hope – it was and is *real*.

The second occasion was yesterday during the service for our good friend, Lorraine Zimmerman. Carol Anne was in the middle of reading the Gospel Lesson from Matthew – from the fifth chapter – the portion we call the Beatitudes. For one brief moment, I relived an experience of eleven years ago, in January of 1997, when those of us from Niagara Falls Air Base were in Israel and those engineers and I were on the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee and one of them opened the Bible to that passage and had me read to them – because they wanted to be hear Jesus' words. A flush came over me as Carol Anne read those words, for I remembered how that moment on a hillside in Galilee was the single most important event in my twenty-eight years as a Chaplain with the Air Force – because that was the moment a group of young to middle aged men had a special and holy moment together. We “got it.” We grasped the reality of the good news in a world that needs the Gospel so very much.

Moments like that mitigate the fact that we do not have the benefit of seeing Jesus as did the people of Judea and Galilee two thousand years ago. When we testify to our faith, it doesn't have the immediacy of the words of John the Baptist as found in the Gospel of John. John the Baptizer looked up and saw Jesus. In words we just heard set to two different pieces of music, we heard John profess his faith, of how he was moved to the height of emotion when he said what he did. The moment wasn't captured on "You Tube," but it can be recreated in our minds' eyes and ears. With excitement and exultation, John proclaimed: "Behold! The Lamb of God!"

Since we weren't eyewitnesses to Jesus' baptism, maybe we can take instruction from Paul's affirmation that we hear in his Letter to the Christians in Corinth. We have no reason to believe that Paul, going then by the name of Saul, *ever* met Jesus, ever heard the man of Nazareth speak, or ever witnessed one of our LORD's miracles. Saul – transformed in his Damascus Road conversion experience – switched from his Jewish name to the Greek name, Paul and became a champion of the faith whose members he had previously persecuted. So, like the rest of us, Saul/Paul makes a profession of faith because of that which moved his inner spirit. Hear his words [1 Corinthians 1:1-9]:

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, ... To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our LORD Jesus Christ - their LORD and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the LORD Jesus Christ. I always thank God for you because of His grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in Him you have been enriched in every way - in all your speaking and in all your knowledge - because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our LORD Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our LORD Jesus Christ. God, Who has called you into fellowship with His Son Jesus Christ our LORD, is faithful.

Whether we have Damascus Road moments like Saul/Paul, have known passing moments of clarity like those I described during the services for Ryan and Lorraine – and those are the most recent, as I have been blessed with those throughout my five decades of life – no matter how or where we have experienced moments of clarity in our faith, ... to what do we give testimony? I suppose a more basic question is – what do we believe – and do we believe it strongly enough and passionately enough to make that known to others in what we say and what we do.

During the Adult Bible class this past Wednesday, I asked members of the class to, as best as they were able, complete the following sentence in as few as ten additional words: "I believe, ...." One person did it nine – "I believe that Jesus Christ is my personal LORD and Savior." So I invite you to think now – or in the moments if not days to come – how would you finish that sentence – and then, to what degree do people know that is what you hold dear?

God knows, people know from clothing and bumper stickers on cars what sports teams people like. I recently saw a T-shirt that not only announced affection for one team, but took a swipe at another: "I support two teams: the Red Sox and anyone who beats the Yankees." After today, there will be but two teams left to play in the NFL's post-season and for two weeks, mania will reign supreme. More seriously, let us hope we of this country can be civil this year as more and more of us decide who it is we might want to elect as the next President of these United States of America.

In the middle of a three day weekend for many, when we recall the life, ministry and death of The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., we celebrate his work, realize how much more work there is to do to bring true equality in this country. We recognize how we need to affirm that all people are indeed equal, not only in the eyes of our Creator, but under the law as well. I don't think any of us in this room walked with The Rev. King during his marches in support of civil rights, though it is intriguing how many people of today, particularly politicians, "claim" to have done that. Just as we weren't present when John the Baptist claimed Jesus as the Lamb of God, so we didn't have to be present when The Rev. King preached his sermons for his words to challenge us and compel us to look at who we are as the people of God. Even with the reality of a viable black candidate for the U.S. Presidency in 2008, we know of all too many instances when prejudice of all kinds blocks us from being the family God invites us to be. Globally, do we not cry when murder and mayhem occurs for the simple reason that people of Kenya are born into different tribes, that the people of Iraq are of different sects or ethnic groups or that the peoples of Central America are *still* classified by their European ancestry – with native Mayans still at the bottom of the proverbial heap of social strata!?

Let us remember a basic tenet of our faith: that we are saved by the grace of our LORD JESUS Christ and that we are to share that good news with others. The Greek word for one who shares the good news is "evangelist." We of the Reformed Tradition may spell that word with a lower case "e" because of connotations that accompany Evangelism with an upper case "E," but the commissioning to share God's salvation with others predates Jesus and John the Baptist and all we learn and read in the New Testament. Hear again words from Isaiah, the 49<sup>th</sup> Chapter – in the penultimate verse of those read today [Isaiah 49:6a then 6b]

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel;

In other words, I, the Almighty, expect you to already know part of your task – to be there for the tribes of Jacob and Israel – I expect *more* of you. I, Your God, expect you to do *much* more:

I will give you as a light to the nations, that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

More than five hundred years before Jesus, God asked God's servants to be a light to the nations.

Don't get me wrong – we accomplish much in the way of ministry and mission that demonstrates our love of God and Christ. There are people of Gates Presbyterian Church, the best example being our late friend, Lorraine Zimmerman, who more than "get it," who walk the talk, who exemplify the Christian faith in all that they do and say. In worship, Christian Education, fellowship and outreach, we do much – but we can do more – and each of us can, indeed must, find ways to live the faith all the more, yes, express our faith all the more. We don't have to stand on street corners with our proclamations, but we do have to move from moments of "getting it," to more moments of living "it," more moments of sharing "it," and far more moments of knowing what "it" is – that you and I, despite our all too human ways, know grace and salvation and redemption because of the life, ministry, death, resurrection and reign of the One John the Baptist announced as Agnus Dei, the Lamb of God.

Amen.