

prophet.

West Side has a beautiful worship space with a wonderful history of grand music and leadership in worship. But the real question for us is, Will we have the courage to carry the prophetic voice into the 21st century? We have a Lord who wants us to gather and to gather those who are excluded from many places of influence and power, and cares for us as we care for them. Are we willing to accept both the message of Jesus and his prophetic action? Are we willing to remember who Jesus is today?

There should be no disconnect between worship and justice.

Let us pray. “Gracious God for these moments of worship we are grateful. May you call us outside of ourselves, now, to places where we need courage to take the risks to stand in the face of influences of powers that would resist the message of Jesus. May you call us to prophetic action through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.”

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Dangerous Places
Luke 13:31-35

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Last evening there were a number of opportunities to enjoy talent in this church that we seldom have other opportunities to experience. One of the talented people doing presentations last night at the cabaret was our MC, Dick Curtain who took an opportunity to take some shots at pastors in jokes. Well Dick is a deacon, and I decided I would return the favor by talking about deacons this morning.

A man down on his luck went into a church which catered to the high people of the society and spotting the man’s dirty clothes a deacon worried about the church’s image went to the man and asked him if he needed help. The man said, “I was praying and the Lord told me to come to this church.” The deacon suggested that the man may go pray some more and maybe the Lord might give him a different answer. The next Sunday the man returned and the deacon asked, “Did you get a different answer?” And the man replied, “Yes, I did. I told the Lord that they don’t want me in that church and the Lord said, “Don’t worry about it Son, I have been trying to get into that church for years and haven’t made it yet.”

Now while there is some humor in that there is also a serious message. Our

church and its worship needs to be connected to the dangerous action of caring for those that don't necessarily fit into our agenda. Why did Jerusalem kill the prophets? Why did Jesus say that Jerusalem would be left desolate in terms of its house of worship?

As we prepare for the word, let us pray.

“Now God in these moments may you speak the truth of who you are that it might transform us to make us to become the people you want us to be. It is in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.”

Jerusalem is the worship center of Israel during the time of Jesus. It is where the best acts of worship were done. The finest, the brightest, the most trained are the worship leaders. It is the place that carries the classicism of Israel all the way back to the covenant of Abraham. It is the high holy place. It is the place of the right. It is the place of the presence of God.

It is also the place that kills the prophets. It will be the place that will kill Jesus. What is it about Jerusalem with its experience of the majesty and presence of God that drives it to kill God's prophets?

A Presbyterian Pastor Mark Labberton recently wrote a book called the *Dangerous Act of Worship*. And the subtitle is *Living God's Call to Justice*. Mark is offering a wake-up call to the church around the United States and around the world that if we worship we should become a people of justice. The two acts are interwoven. They

our ability to hear the highest voice of the living God. Don't be intimidated or manipulated by the lower powers. By the very nature of who God is. Prophets are ecstatic. They will not be controlled by the everyday powers of this world.

Now here is the difficult and dangerous thing. If we remember Jesus, we will walk in the prophetic pattern of Jesus himself and we will become prophetic in the ways that do justice in this world. And sometimes it may be in opposition to powerful patterns of life. In just a few weeks our Oratorio choir will be singing the Saint Matthew Passion, the great and long work of Johann Sebastian Bach. In the climax of that passion, reflecting the text of Saint Matthew, the evangelists will say this: “But those however who had seized Jesus led him away to the chief priest. There were the learned priests and the elders had already assembled. Peter, though he had followed him from a distance, up to the palace of the chief priest, and went inside and sat himself near the trial that he might see the outcome of what would be. The chief priest though and also the elders and the whole assembly sought to find untrue witnesses against Jesus in order to kill him. And they did find none.” Then there is a chord that is sung which is a reflection of that moment: “the world has judged me deceitfully (the words of Jesus) with lies and with false utterance, many a snare and a secret plot. Lord, guard me in this danger, shield me from false deceits.”

And we all know what happened to Jesus. Jerusalem did kill the ultimate

It was a few months later that Varian Fry was arrested and personally expelled from France for helping the Jewish people escape.

Jerusalem is the center of worship but Jerusalem is also a center of power. And beware, where the center of worship is, is also the center of political and religious power. It is a wonderful thing to put on shows of the transcendence of God but it will not fulfill its commitment to meet the people in their pain.

We have to look at ourselves, in light of our commitment to beautiful events of worship. Not that we should stop those or change them, but that we should also always carry the connection between the dangerous act of worship and the commitment to social justice.

As you know one of my favorite pieces of music is Mendelssohn's Elijah. Early in that work the words of the prophet Obadiah are given, "You people rend your hearts and not your garments" It is a statement of calling the people of leadership in Israel at that point in time to change their behavior patterns to be more caring for the people, to pay more attention to the poor.

Our religious systems cannot necessarily coexist with the prophets and the call to do justice. Sometimes the two become incompatible. Sometimes we have to choose justice over religious loyalty and honor. Sometimes we have to choose justice over political honor and loyalty.

Prophets report to a higher power. Don't let loyalty to lower powers inhibit

are the similar but blending reflections of different sides of the presence of God. Worship needs to move us to righteousness and justice. Grace helps us to accept the truth that God speaks to us here but then calls us to turn our lives around so that we begin to practice the kinds of deeds that God wants to do in the world. Labberton connects Christian worship with biblical justice. Worship must pursue justice and righteousness. It is dangerous because worship is meant to produce lives that are fully attentive to the action of God in the world. Nothing is more important, Labberton says, than for us to wake up and practice the dangerous acts of worship, that is to live into God's justice. It is not acceptable to have a beautiful worship center with great acts of worship and not to practice the justice of God in real life.

There is a famous Catholic theologian Johan Baptist Metz who used to talk in his theology about "dangerous memory". He said if you really take the Lord's Supper seriously, to "do this in remembrance of me", you must remember the entire life of Jesus. And that includes Jesus' dangerous act of going to Jerusalem. In spite of how the Jerusalem power leadership accepted or rejected him he continued to practice the kinds of things that cared for people who had no power, and were poor and hungry. It is a dangerous memory of freedom. It is a dangerous memory of those who walk in the steps of prophets, because they will suffer.

You may remember that back in the 1970's there was an archbishop in El Salvador by the name of Oscar Romero. Oscar Romero was known as a conservative,

very much a party man, a man who stood with the institutional church and did what the church wanted him to do. But the more he spent time with the people in El Salvador, the more he began to change his perspective on this. He became more and more an advocate for the poor. He began to see how people who had power abused that power and mistreated the poor of El Salvador. Now I want you to know, that there was a time in my life when I was misled about this. I sided with those who were anti-Oscar Romero. And since those days I have repented of that mistake. I understand that such a person is a prophet who stands with the poor sometimes over and against people in powerful places. And it was the night that he was celebrating the Lord's supper, the mass, and in a special place where other people had been killed by the political leadership of El Salvador, that he himself was killed just after uttering these words: "Those who surrender to the service of the poor through the love of Christ will live like the grain of wheat that dies. The harvest comes because of the grain that dies. We know that every effort to improve society, above all when society is so full of injustice and sin, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us."

He had no sooner finished the act of remembrance that he was shot to death by a hired assassin, hired by the political leadership of El Salvador. Some of which were good church people.

How can it be that we can have people who are so visibly invested in faith and

worship become the same people who turn and kill the prophets? This is the great dilemma of the history of the church.

At West Side Presbyterian Church we stand according to our own history along side those that have been willing to risk their lives for people who are in very difficult and unjust environments. We sit on a street that is called Varian Fry Way, named after Varian Fry, who himself was willing to risk his life to help escapees from Germany to go through France to leave the country so the Nazi party would not kill them.

He said himself it was a wake-up call when he saw what was happening in France. "I was informed about 8:00 last night that there was an anti-Jewish demonstration in the streets. I hurried out and presently heard shouting toward the east. When I got there I found a large crowd lined up on both sides of the street forcing each car which came by to run the gauntlet stopping all the cars in which Jewish looking men or women were riding and dragging them out. Dragging out the Jews and beating them up. I saw one man brutally kicked and spat upon as he lay on the sidewalk, a woman bleeding, a man whose head was covered with blood, a hysterical woman crying, men losing their temper at the police or the storm troopers." It goes on...

We have a history at Westside Presbyterian Church of our worship being connected to our commitment to justice and it is a risky business.