

Covenant Word

Bearing Testimony

Isaiah 12; Malachi 3:10; Luke 21:5-19

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
November 18, 2007*

This summer found my family worshipping at a variety of churches. We were awed by the beauty of cathedrals, moved by the music of well-endowed music ministries and touched by the simplicity of a Quaker meeting. The church, however, that created the greatest amount of conversation among us has been The Believer's Christian Fellowship in Harlem, New York. Maybe it was the prayer circle that I have mentioned to you previously; maybe it was the singing; maybe it was the dancing; or maybe it was the giving.

For you see, when it was time to receive the days' offering, the pastor came to the pulpit with about six envelopes in her hand. At the same time, two ushers came to the front with deep and wide baskets. As the pastor stood in the pulpit, she began to bear witness. She said things like: We all know that Sister Ann is a new Christian. She is just beginning to understand her role as a giver to the church. She could not be present for worship this week to bring her offering, so she left with me her <and they all said together> "first fruits."

She held up the next envelope. It looked exactly like the first one. The pastor said: We all know that Brother Jones has a sick sister in Toledo. Brother Jones left on Tuesday to be with her. But before Brother Jones got on the airplane, he left with me his <and they all said together> "tithe."

Again, a new envelope, but identical in look to the others:

Sister Margaret is in the hospital. When I went to visit and pray with her on Thursday, she gave me her <and they all said together> "tithe."

We continued through every envelope. Each person was named by the pastor and what amazed me was the fact that the people knew whether the financial gift inside was a first fruit or a tithe! Then, with money in hand, we were all invited to bear witness to God by walking forward to bring our gifts. The pastor remained behind the pulpit and watched as

each person dropped their offerings into the baskets. It made our annual pledge march appear to be a lesson in stewardship lite!

Privacy and ethical issues aside, when I boil the approach of Believer's Christian Fellowship down to its essence, it is not too far removed from the accountability we maintain in the Personal and Corporate Commitments which we read to one another as members. They say: "We commit ourselves to give sacrificially of our money as one tangible expression of a wholehearted self-giving stewardship of all of life, with the tithe as a guide."

What is the significance of our gifts if not to give thanks and to bear witness to what God has done in our lives?

When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem with his disciples, they are awed by the beautiful Temple. Jesus immediately predicts the destruction of the Temple and that the days that follow its destruction will be filled with persecution and trouble. While there are many, like Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins in their popular series entitled *Left Behind*, who make big bucks playing on others' fears about the end of the world or who desire to be seen as prophetic in

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recognizing current political trends and natural disasters as signs that we are entering into "end times," the truth is

that Jesus did not give a timetable of how this would all take place, much less when it would occur.

It presents a bit of a dilemma for those of us who are far removed from the earthly life and ministry of Jesus, and when, for the most part, do not live with the immediate expectation of His return. We are left to wonder about how to regard this text. I would propose to us that it is less about prediction and more about prescription. In other words, it is less about observing the clues as to when the world will end and more about acting in it by bearing witness to God's goodness. (Kristen Johnston Largen, "Theological Themes," *Lectionary Homiletics*, Nov. 18, 2007)

The text describes that the ultimate victory will be for those who find their identity in Jesus. The reality that Jesus' presence will be with us to direct and protect us (vses 15-19) also gives us the assurance that the work to be done will bring the Kingdom of God into this present reality. It is not our responsibility to predict where and when Jesus will come again—that is for God to know, and for God to bring about. Instead, it is our calling to bring the light of Christ into the darkness, trusting that Christ will be with us. It is our calling to speak a word of hope and healing to those who are fettered by sin and despair, trusting that Christ will direct us with wisdom. (Largen) It is our calling to


**Baptist Church of the
Covenant**

Where Faith Comes to Life.

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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and
for Bible study at 10:30 a.m.

bear witness to what Christ is doing in our lives and the lives of others, trusting that Christ will put the right words into our mouths at just the right time. So we give our lives, our abilities, and our finances in order to bear witness to Christ.

A part of my sabbatical experience this summer included many luxurious hours of reading stories that often spoke of faith and knowing God in rich and powerful ways. One of my best reads was a novel entitled *The Witness of St. Ansgar's* by Francis W. Nielson. Each chapter tells a story about a member of this west side Dutch parish in New York City during the early 1900s. It is told through the eyes of Father Benigno who served for 60 years as a Franciscan brother at St. Ansgar's. So rich was his ministry that people in the neighborhood often said that Benigno was St. Ansgar's Church on Stanley Street.

The person who felt Benigno's influence most powerfully was a young boy named Mario. Mario found himself running every day to St. Ansgar's after school. It was not just to pray, or to meditate. It was to be there...to be there to catch the light, to soak in the colors of the stained-glass windows, to stand in the airy shafts of light slanting from the ceiling, and to experience the great hush that walled out the noise of the throbbing city.

Needing a helper, Father Benigno talked with Mario's parents and after offering a small stipend, it was agreed that Mario would be Benigno's assistant. Being behind the scenes at the church, Mario came to learn many things. Most of all, he came to know Father Benigno. He watched him, studied him, imitated him, and loved him in the purest of senses. After work each day as Mario walked home, he was keenly aware that if all else in the neighborhood should pass away—the large buildings, the river, the whistles of the locomotives in the freight yards—that one thing would endure. That one thing was Father Benigno. After all, what is memory for, if not to bear witness?

One of Mario and Father Benigno's favorite things to do together was to watch people come into the church searching for a miracle. So predictable were some responses that Benigno and Mario categorized them. There were the pawers. These were people who stroked, caressed, rubbed and massaged all the religious objects within reach. There were the kissers who lipped every saint, crucifix and sacred picture. There were the genuflectors who seemed to have their right knees loosely hinged. And then, there were the bathers. They would anchor themselves by a holy water stoup and compulsively splash themselves.

Mario and Benigno would often comment to one another from their discreet observation points that every conceivable type of manic behavior seemed to be liberated inside of quiet ordinary-appearing people once they set foot in a church. (Do you see why I loved this book so?) Benigno would tell Mario, "Nuts... nuts, they be nuts! They come looking for a miracle. It just be so they don't have to do nothin' themselves. They always want to let God do it."

To the reader, it is obvious that Benigno is grooming Mario to become a priest. But there is a war on in Europe; Mario and Benigno exchange hard words over a frivolous matter; and so Mario enlists in the army. But while Mario was fighting a war, Benigno was also fighting, for he had grown deathly ill.

An emergency leave was granted Mario, and he came to sit beside Benigno's bed. As he kept vigil, Mario realized that it was Maundy Thursday. He thought of the Tenebrae service at St. Ansgar's and how, like the candles in the service, light was being extinguished in the very room in which he sat as Benigno's life slipped away. Benigno died in the early hours of Good Friday with Mario holding his hand.

Just before Christmas of 1944, the Germans mounted a savage counter-attack against the Allied forces. The casualties were heavy. Mario was among them, and he was terribly wounded. He slowly recovered physically, but he seemed unable to comprehend or respond. He was the type of patient that could be easily overlooked, because he gave no trouble at all. Years passed with no sign of a change, and then a most remarkable thing occurred.

One Sunday, all of the ambulatory patients were taken to the Catholic Church. For some reason, on that particular morning, the Priest came out upon the high altar to celebrate mass without an altar boy. When the priest began to say the prayers and the responses ordinarily given by the altar boy, Mario rose from the pew, walked to the communion rail, and began to assist the priest in serving mass. Mario had, at last, come to himself.

With memory intact, Mario returned home to Stanley Street and made a pilgrimage to St. Ansgar's. He sat on the back pew and was filled with memories: the voices, the ceremonies, the churning of the bells, the puffs of incense, the thunder of the organ. What had he expected coming here? A miracle?

He smiled as he remembered Benigno's words about the miracle seekers, and then he realized with a shock that he was living one. Of all the men who had died just before Christmas in 1944, why was he, Mario, saved? Just one of those things? ...an accident? "No," he thought, "I was saved because I can remember. I can remember Benigno and all that was worthwhile in our friendship." He began to realize that life itself is miraculous and that as long as he had his memories, he could bear witness to the church and all of its glory. And so that is what Mario did for the remainder of his days. He bore witness to how the church had saved him.

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<Hold up pledge card like I did earlier with the envelopes> They represent our thankfulness for a place of belonging and sanctuary.

<Pledge card> They represent our gratitude for a family of faith that walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death and shouts from the mountain tops when we have joyous news to share.

<Pledge card> They represent our trust that the monies we give will be used to minister to others through our building and through programming and through the very basics of life that are provided through benevolence.

So as we respond to the call of discipleship, we invite you to bring your pledge card to the communion table and return to your seats as we prepare to sing the hymn of commitment. Should there be other decisions of faith, I will be here at the front to receive you on the profession of your faith, as a candidate for church membership or for decisions of vocation. Will you join me in bearing witness?