

CHRIST ENCOUNTERS: WITNESS

SHERARD EDINGTON

Acts 2:14a, 22-36

Sadly, since the beginning of time, people have been drawn into conflict with one another. Even the opening pages of our holy scripture tell of one man murdering his own brother. People fight one another. And when they get in large groups, they wage wars.

Today, April 16th, is remarkable because on this day, a noteworthy battle was fought. Now, you may be thinking, “What's the big deal with that?” On any given day on our planet there is some conflict taking place. No doubt, there have been thousands if not tens of thousands of battles fought on April 16 or 17 or 18 or 19 or any day.

But one of these battles stands out, not because it was fought, but because it was documented. The Battle of Megiddo, which was fought between the Egyptians and the Canaanites on April 16, 1457 BC (3500 years ago), is, in fact, the first known battle to have been recorded in what we would regard as relatively reliable detail.

The leader of the Egyptian forces was Pharaoh Thutmose III. He was leading his army up from Egypt into Canaanite territory on a campaign to expand Egypt's dominion. During this campaign, his personal scribe, a man named Tjaneni maintained a daily journal. At the Battle of Megiddo, Tjaneni kept detailed notes on troop movements, battle plans, weapons, chariots, horses, and so on.

Then, twenty years later, the pharaoh—now in the latter days of his life—desired that his battles be remembered. So, using the detailed reports of his scribe, Thutmose had his military exploits inscribed onto the stone walls of a temple at Karnak, where they can be seen today (assuming you read hieroglyphics). These words, through the centuries, have stood as an enduring witness to the accomplishments of this Pharaoh.

Our reading for today is also about being a witness. Here, it is being a witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are reading from the second chapter of the New Testament book called Acts of the Apostles, or simply Acts for short. Acts is the continuation of the Gospel of Luke, and it picks up with the resurrected Jesus ascending into heaven. Before he goes, he instructs his disciples to remain in Jerusalem telling them that soon they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit. When that occurs, Jesus tells them, they *will be [his] witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

The disciples do as Jesus instructed them. They wait. That must have been a confusing, disorienting, and emotionally trying time for these followers of Jesus. They had seen so much, they had experienced so much, and their future seemed so uncertain. Jesus had been executed, had come back to life, and then ascended into heaven. If anyone should have felt left behind, it would have been those disciples. So, they waited, and they prayed.

When the day of Pentecost arrived, these followers of Jesus were gathered in a home when something they could barely describe happened. Was it the rush of a mighty wind? Was the room suddenly on fire? What was it that touched each of them leaping from person to person? What is it that changed them? They could feel it. The world could feel it. And the world pressed in around that house where they were gathered. The street filled with people from all over who were in Jerusalem for Pentecost and had heard the wind and seen the fire. And in their own languages asked what was going on? What does this mean? And the those who were the followers of Jesus—the Galileans—understood it all. And they responded to these people each in their own language.

It was Pentecost. It was a day of miracles. The barriers between people were being torn down. The Holy Spirit was at work.

Peter, who had assumed his role as leader of the disciples, looked out at the gathered masses and began to speak to them. He preached to them. He told them why they were there. He placed it all in the context of the words of the ancient prophet Joel. And, as I read a few moments ago, Peter began to tell of a man named Jesus. He said, *Jesus of Nazareth, a man brought to your attention by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs, a man in whom God had a definite plan, a man crucified and killed, a man who God raised up, and freed from death. This is the man that our ancestor King David wrote about. David told us of the one who would not remain corrupted by death. He told us of the one who would fill us with the gladness of God's presence. He is the descendant of David that God promised to place on David's throne.*

Peter continues on preaching, *We here are witnesses.* And Peter points to the disciples, *These are the ones who knew this man. They witnessed his teaching, his miracles, and deeds of power. They witnessed his death and they have witnessed him alive again.* And Peter says to the crowd, *Let all of you know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus that was crucified.*

What is a witness? A witness is someone who has personal knowledge of an event. We usually think of witnesses as having observed a crime or an accident. The requisite qualification of being a witness is personal knowledge. You can't be a witness with secondhand information. "Did you see that hog truck crash into that church?" "No, but I know a guy who did and he told me about it." That is not enough. A witness has to see it themselves.

A witness doesn't just see, they also tell. They tell what they know. A witness who keeps silent is not a witness; they are just an observer. A witness sees and a witness testifies to what they have seen.

When Peter spoke these words 2000 years ago, no one knew of a town in Tennessee called Lebanon. Yet here we are. No one imagined that his words would carry over time and space and inspire us to gather in this beautiful room to worship God and give glory to the one who was crucified. When Peter preached, Lebanon was literally the ends of the earth. And yet, here we are. And we are tasked now with being witnesses of the message of Jesus Christ to Wilson County, to Tennessee, to the U.S., to the ends of the earth.

Times have changed in 2000 years. The entire globe has been mapped. People have been most everywhere. So, where today do we find "the ends of the earth?" Where do we go to carry the message of Christ? Is it our own children who no longer attend church? Is it to the "nones"—those people who check none when asked for their religious affiliation? Is it those people who once faithful were hurt by the church and have wandered away? Is it the lost generation of millennials, of teenagers? Is it those in? Or those in the LGBTQ+ community? Those who feel that Christianity has become too mean, too judgmental, too divisive? Is it with these folk that we find what Jesus called *the ends of the earth*? Is this where we are called to witness Christ' message of compassion and forgiveness?

How is it that we witness? Do we witness by screaming at people that they must love God or that they will burn in hell? Do we witness by telling people that they need to fall in line and act a certain way—a way that we find acceptable?

Or is it better that we witness through words and actions that mimic the words and actions of Christ? By showing compassion and forgiveness? By working for justice and peace? Is that how we witness?

Do you remember the Battle of Megiddo that I mentioned—the earliest documented battle. Megiddo is notable for another reason. Megiddo is a fortified city in what today is northern Israel. In 1457 BC, the place was not Israel because the Israelites had not yet arrived there. Ironically, they were still enslaved in Egypt. Moses would not lead them out for another century. Over the centuries, Megiddo was the location of several battles. It even gets a mention in the book of Revelation as the site of the final battle between darkness and light. In Revelation, it is not called Megiddo but *Har Megiddo* or, as you may know it, Armageddon.

Some Christians choose to interpret this passage as a physical war at this place of Armageddon between God and the forces of Satan in a literal end of the world confrontation. But instead of conflict and violence, what if Armageddon is a new reality in which the voices of the faithful rise up above all the noise of the world to

give witness to the reality of God's love in our world? That would be a far better battle, wouldn't it.

If we are to call ourselves Christians, then we must take up the task of witnessing. We are called to be witnesses from here in Lebanon not to the end of the world, but *to the ends of the earth*. When we recognize the presence of Christ in our world, when we testify to others what we know to be true, when we give of ourselves, when we make Christ the center of our lives, that is when we are witnesses. And we don't do this alone. We have been empowered by the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God.