

“Aliens and Exiles: 4) Keeping Faith in a Secular Society”

a sermon by

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Text: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (I Peter 3: 15-16).

Anna Carter Florence, is an associate professor of preaching at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, where she teaches a class entitled “Preaching and Youth.” One of the New Testament passages that she uses in her class is the story from Book of Acts that is found in Acts 20:7-12. It is the story of the time that Paul was preaching in Troas in Asia Minor. According to the text, Paul began preaching after dinner and continued to do so until after midnight.

Now, I am quite sure that Paul was a good preacher, but on this occasion he was apparently on a roll. The sermon lasted over four hours. Moreover, the Book of Acts describes a scene that must have not been totally conducive to worship. The hour was late. There were burning lamps in the room that were smoking heavily—not to mention the fact that there was no Starbucks coffee to keep people awake.

A young man named Eutychus was sitting on the ledge of the window in the back of the room. Apparently, he became so sleepy, that he fell out of the window to the ground three stories below. When the startled worshippers rushed down to check on him, he was lifeless. When Paul arrived on the scene, the boy was pronounced dead. But Paul picked up the lifeless body, placed

the young man in his arms and resuscitated him. In a short while the young man went home unharmed and Paul continued his sermon until dawn.

Anna Carter Florence likes to use this story with teenagers, because she says they can identify with Eutychus. They have all had the experience of being very bored in church. In fact, when the ministers in her class interviewed the people in their churches about worship, the adults that were polled all agreed that their favorite part of the worship service was the sermon. The same was not true for the teenagers. Their favorite part of the worship service was the benediction.

Anna Carter Florence makes a point in her article that has something to say to preachers and parents alike. The young people that were interviewed all noted the fact that none of them had ever been asked for their input on worship. No member of the ministerial staff, no parent had ever asked them what they liked about worship, what they received from it, or even what they expected to receive.

I.

One of the critical questions facing the church today has to do with young people and their response to the Christian faith. Ross Douthat has written recently in the *Atlantic Monthly* an article he entitles "Crises of Faith." In that article, he states the thesis that while America is becoming more secular, Europe is becoming more religious. For many years, just the opposite has been the case. For the last hundred years Europe has become a very secular continent. In Europe the rising presence of the Islamic faith has led to a more active Christian remnant asserting itself. In the United States there is a different trend at work. More and more people are distancing themselves from organized religion. A recent Pew Research Center found that 20 percent of 18-25 year olds reported no religious affiliation, up from just 11 percent in the late 1980's. Many people are concerned today that we are rapidly becoming a more and more secular nation.

The Letter of I Peter is addressed to a group of "aliens and exiles." The Christian community in Asia Minor, not unlike Christians in this country today, found themselves increasingly on the fringe of society. They were persecuted by the Roman government. They were not a majority culture.

In the passage that I have read this morning the author of I Peter strikes some of the themes that elsewhere characterize the letter: 1) Christians regularly suffer rejection and disgrace; 2) they must do what is good even if their goodness is the occasion for suffering; 3) suffering is to be due only to their doing good, not to any evil they do; 4) because they suffer for doing good they are blessed; 5) Christian lives must witness to their hope, because Christ's triumphant resurrection carries with it the promise for the Christian's future.

What is new in this passage is the call for Christians to give a defense for the hope that is in them (verse 15). I Peter suggests that part of our mission is to articulate to the culture around us what it is that defines us as a church and the things for which we stand. So, let me propose several of these for us today.

II.

The first defining aspect of our faith is our insistence on the centrality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Some years ago a Presbyterian Minister by the name of Dick Ficca preached a sermon at the Peacemaking Conference entitled “What’s the Big Deal About Jesus?” In that sermon he expressed an opinion that is very prominent in our society today. He went on to say that the church should not put too much emphasis on the uniqueness of Jesus. After all, the argument goes; Jesus is only one religious figure among others. There is Buddha, Moses, Mohammed, Confucius, and these religious leaders are all the same.

The Christian witness stands or falls on our conviction in a clear and unequivocal way to affirm that Jesus Christ is not simply one Word of God among other words, but that in Jesus Christ we have received the revelation of God that defines our faith and life. This does not mean that we have to be intolerant or disrespectful of other religions. In fact, we are called to show respect and appreciation for other expressions. It does, however, place upon us the clear responsibility to show how the revelation of God in Christ informs our faith and gives meaning to our lives.

The Gospel of John begins with the affirmation “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” (John 1:1). That Word or “logos” is Jesus Christ. I Peter echoes this insistence on the Word made flesh. He calls Jesus a ‘living stone’ though rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God sight.”

III.

The second defining aspect of our faith is our insistence on majesty and praise of God. The notion of a living and dynamic God is central to all that we do. The God of the Old Testament and the New Testament is a God who is the Creator of the heavens and earth and who governs them by his will. God is energy, force, and life. God is purpose, intention, and will. He is the Lord God who “comes with might, who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand.” This is the creator God who not only creates the heavens and the earth but who works in human history to accomplish his purposes.

Throughout its history the Presbyterian Church has given emphasis to the ultimate purpose of human life as the service of God. The first question of the Shorter Catechism: “What is man’s chief end?” is answered: “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” The glory of God and God’s purposes in the world are more important than the salvation of one’s own soul. Some years ago in the Calvinist churches ministers upon ordination were asked the question: “Are you willing to be damned for the Glory of God?” That is certainly a harsh question and on one level certainly seems unfair. But it does make a point. It is the attempt to root out the last element of self-seeking in religion.

Certainly that is true in worship. There is a great movement in worship in this country today to denigrate worship into a form of entertainment and self-fulfillment. Churches in this

country go to great extremes in seeking to entertain worshippers. Many churches today offer “food courts” and exercise rooms to entertain those who attend worship.

John Calvin, the great Reformer of the Sixteenth Century, placed a great emphasis on the tendency of worship to idolatry. Calvin never seriously contemplated the possibility of unbelief or atheism. For him the options were faith in the living God or idolatry. Calvin maintained the distinction between the Creator and the Creature. Our responsibility in worship is to listen to the Word of God and to correct our lives in accordance to that word.

Some years ago a singer by the name of Roberta Flack recorded a song entitled “Let Pharaoh Go.” When I first heard it, I was somewhat amused. After all, I thought, that is not the way the story of the Exodus goes. When the people of Israel were in Egypt, Moses was charged with forcing the Egyptian Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. But upon reflection it appeared to me that the song had a point. It was far more difficult to get the people of Israel to let go of Pharaoh than to get Pharaoh to let them to go. As soon as they were in the wilderness, the people wanted to go back to Egypt. There was no food in the wilderness and no water. They longed for the “fleshpots of Egypt.” They preferred the security of slavery to the terrible uncertainty of freedom.

The life of faith and the worship of the church are always called to place God in the center.

IV.

Then, finally, as Christians we are called to be servants of God in the world in which we live. The writer of I Peter is very sensitive to this. He knows that the Christian community in Asia Minor is being carefully watched. He emphasized to them the responsibilities of living their lives in a way that is a credit to their faith.

Presbyterians, at their best, have always nurtured a vision of the Christian community as nurtured by the Word of God. John Calvin’s reformation in Geneva, Switzerland was an attempt to conform society to the view of life of the New Testament. In Scotland and in England the Reformed community sought to build the “New Jerusalem.” Presbyterians have always maintained that the life of a particular community is of great importance to God.

Dean Rusk, a former Secretary of State under President John F. Kennedy and President Lyndon B. Johnson, wrote in his *Memoirs* of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. It was the closest that our nation ever came to nuclear war with the Soviets. The Soviet government had placed nuclear weapons in Cuba, just 90 miles from our shore. A young American President had ordered the Soviets to dismantle these weapons. A Soviet fleet was on its way to Cuba and the Americans had instituted an embargo. Rusk remembers that all of the Armed Forces were on “red alert.” All of our B-52s were airborne. Our missile silos and nuclear submarines were on alert. We were literally minutes away from an all out nuclear confrontation. During that period Rusk wrote that the question that kept coming back to him was the question that he learned in a catechism class as a young boy in Cherokee County, Georgia. The question was the first question of the Shorter Catechism: “What is man’s chief end?” That is the most important question we

face today. What is our chief end? What is our purpose in this life? Do we believe that God has placed us on this planet to destroy the air we breathe and the water we drink? Do we believe that God has placed us here for Muslims to kill Christians or Christians to kill Jews?

As a downtown church in the heart of Charlotte, this church has a unique mission to bear witness to God's love in Jesus Christ, particularly for those who live at the fringe of our society—the homeless, the hungry, those whom Jesus called “the least of these.”

May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.

Amen!