

Sermon

SAYING “I AM A CHRISTIAN” CAN BE SCARY by Tim Crouch¹

Text: Exodus 12:1-14

It is an all too common story, one that I have experienced on many occasions. And I have heard colleagues describe similar situations. “So, what do you do?” someone will ask. “Oh, I’m a student,” I’ll reply, hoping the conversation ends there. It never does. “Where do you go to school?” “Queen’s”. Don’t ask, don’t ask, don’t ask. “Oh, really? I have a cousin who goes there.” Maybe they won’t, maybe you’ve gotten away with it, Tim... “What are you taking?” Dammit. “Oh, I’m just taking my MDiv.” “What’s that?” “Oh, it’s just a theology degree.” “Really?” And the conversation goes on from there.

Sometimes it turns towards why they don’t believe in God. Sometimes I get asked why I would want such a degree. Sometimes people try to discern how normal I am. Sometimes it goes over really well. And sometimes people are really turned off. In all situations I find myself trying to accommodate, trying to make excuses, or to prove myself to them. I certainly can’t think of a time when I have come out and answered, “I serve the Lord God, who is present in Jesus Christ.” I wonder how that would go over!

In the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures we learn about the Israelites, captive in the land of Egypt. They are a people of slaves who have been worked and beaten, sometimes to death; a people who have witnessed their children slaughtered in Egypt; a people who are not likely to want to stick their necks out too far. They are called to find a lamb, or a kid without any blemishes. And on a specific night they are to slaughter it. And with the blood from the animal they are instructed to paint the posts of their doorways.

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In Exodus 5, these people are yelled at by Pharaoh, called “Shirkers”, and loaded them with extra work. All this is done because they associate with Moses, and they associate with their Lord. And now they are called once again to come forward, and paint their doors with blood!! They are certainly not called to slink back out of the limelight and go unnoticed.

And the Lord says, “When I see the blood, I will pass over you.” In the Jewish Study Bible the word “pasah” which here is deemed to mean “pass over”, gets an alternate translation as “protect”, which carries a much more active connotation. Somewhat uniquely from other narratives of the event, there is the implication of an agent working with God. The destroyer is mentioned in verse 23, and God will not allow this destroyer to enter into the marked homes. The Jewish Study Bible argues that when the word is used again in Isaiah 31 verse 5, to pass over or to spare Jerusalem, it seems out of place when compared to the other words of shielding and protecting. This is not a God who simply passes over the Israelites, but a God who protects them, a God who calls them to mark themselves, to declare themselves part of the fold. A God who calls the people to let it be known that they are on the side of the One who strikes down the Egyptians, who has beset them with plague after plague. These people are called to openly paint themselves as being on the side of a God that will curry them no favour in the land of Egypt.

What must the readers of this book have thought when, centuries later, the Hebrew people were exiled in Babylon? What were they called to do? The stories of Babylon and Egypt certainly have their similarities. An imprisoned people beset on all sides by an overwhelming power. In Babylon they were once again the outsiders, watching their numbers fall as people assimilated into the culture around them. In Babylon they read an ancestral story about marking their door with blood. Not so that God would pass over, but so that God would protect them. They are called to distinguish themselves from the crowd, given these ancient rites and feasts to mark themselves as God’s chosen people. They are

called to make a profound leap of faith, to confess and profess their identities. They are called to do so in Babylon, where they are already outcasts. And in doing so, they will become God's chosen people again.

And yet, as we look at the history of the world, at the history of Christianity — and not only Christianity, but at the history of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism — we read stories of faithful people being persecuted because of their faithfulness. We read and hear stories about the Christian martyrs who are held in such high esteem, crying out that they are God's and God's alone... *as they get mauled to death by lions*. We know of some of the awful persecutions of the Reformation. And today around the world, men, women and children are persecuted for their faiths; Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Christians, all face persecution that comes with their confession of faith.

And in our world, here in Canada: if people are going to be creeped out by me; if they are going to think that I'm "one of those Christians" — whatever that means — if they are going to assume I am a war mongerer who only wants to convert them; why would I confess my faith? Why would the Israelites confess theirs when they have their lives on the line?

And yet, they do. They do paint their doors with blood, and they are protected. In Babylon, despite the pressure to assimilate into the outside community, they remain firm, and Judaism, with all of its practices and traditions, arises out of a community in exile. A community that needed to profess its faith, so that it was not lost.

It is petrifying telling people that I am a Christian. I find it so hard sometimes. As the earlier conversation continues I may throw in a swear word, just to prove that I am normal. And if the conversation gets far enough I may add the ever present "but" into responses. I'm a Christian, but... or I'm studying to be a minister, but...

But there is a problem with this. I am a Christian. I am studying to be a minister. And though it pains me to say it, I am not part of

the community that isn't Christian. I can relate to them, I can be friends with them, but I am not one of them. I will never be one of them until I give up my confession of faith. Everyone in this room is here because we are called to ministry in some form or another. That is of primary importance to us, especially if it is to be our vocation. We are called to be ministers. We are called to be marked as such. Though I often try to deny it by proving to everyone else how cool and normal I am, more and more, in this society, I am not normal. None of us is. In this society, I do not even think I'm cool.

And that is scary. It is scary because it is hard to see that God will protect us from becoming some sort of outcast. It is scary because I have heard what people say about Christians. It is scary because I have experienced the apathy that is directed at me. People think we're naïve, or misguided, or the root of all the problems in the world. And yet what are we called to say?

We are called to say that we are Christians. Not only that but we are called to say that we are ministers of God's word. And if we are the minister's of God's word, and if we are leaders in the church, and if we struggle with even letting people know this, then how can we expect other parishioners not to be ashamed of their faith? How can we expect our church to survive?

We are called to say we are Christians because that is what we are. Others are called to say they are Muslim because that is what they are. Still others are called to say that they are Hindu because that is what they are. And all of us are called to feel the eyes of society on our backs at all times, because we are to live a life devoted to God.

So I say here in a confession, that I believe in a Trinitarian God. I believe in the Creator, in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. I believe that I am called to be a minister. That is the vocation I am here to struggle for, and that is the vocation that I must be proud of. And I invite everyone to make a confession of their faith at some time, to let it be voiced that it is who you are, whether you are Christian, whether you are Unitarian, whether you do not have a clue what you believe, other than in some sort of God that is acting

in our world in some sort of way. I invite everyone to make the confession; first silently to themselves if they choose. Paint the inside of your door with blood, that you might first become aware of it. And then paint the outside, to let everyone know that you are a person of faith.

The Israelites were not called to convert the Egyptians; the Israelites were called to paint their doors and let the Egyptians know that though they face persecution, though they face enslavement, though they may even face death, they are God's chosen people.

And when we go out into the world, and profess a faith in the God who lives, we will encounter those who disagree. We will encounter those who will think us crazy, and who will not want to associate with us. It is a part of our call. The protection God offers is not from pain, it is not from sadness or loneliness. The protection God offers is from the burden that is separation from God.

God says, "The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood I will protect you, and no plague shall destroy you." God distinguished the Israelite from the Egyptian, the chosen from the not, those in relationship with God and those out of relationship with God, by the sign of blood on their door. Those who make the confession, who stand firm and take the risk of their profession of faith, will find *not* that God passes over them, but that God becomes present in their lives. If the Israelite does not make that outward profession, then they become Egyptian; if the Egyptian makes that profession, they become Israelite. That is the only distinction God will look for on the night of the plague, not race, but that mark on the door, that says, "I am Yours, the world will know it, I am not ashamed."

Today we mark Maundy Thursday, the day when Jesus said to Peter, "I tell you Peter, the cock will not crow this day until you have denied three times that you know me." And Peter does, and he goes out afterwards "and weeps bitterly". It is the day when Jesus asked his disciples to stay awake with him in the Garden of Gethsemane, and they all fell asleep. It is the day when we are

called to reflect on how hard it is to stay awake. On how hard it is to remain loyal, and how hard it is to remain present in our faith.

But think how hard it was for Jesus, who was crucified, because he would not concede. Who remained firm even unto death.

We are not alone when we stand firm in our faith. We may become outcasts, we may become isolated, but we are not alone. We share the company of those around us here today. We share the company of the chosen people in Egypt, of those in exile in Babylon who would not submit to assimilation into their culture. We share the company of those who have gone on before us, and despite fear professed that they love their God. We share the company of the one who was crucified, of the one who professed a faith despite extreme opposition. And through that shared experience, we know that God is present, we know that we share the company of a God who is not simply passing over.