

A TORCH AND A SWORD

A sermon in the series

God is Still Speaking in the Symbols of Our Sanctuary

**Thomas R. Henry
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Texts: Matthew 5: 13-16 / Matthew 10: 32-39 (included at end of sermon)
(After singing “Onward Christian Soldiers”)

Can you remember the last time you sang that hymn? It’s not one that is used much by any church anymore. It is filled with Crusade imagery. Christians against unbelievers. Marching as to war. Aggressive and militant and maybe even a bit arrogant..(Although it does say marking as to war, not into war. That could be an important distinction I need to think more about.)

In a day and time in which Progressive Christians are working hard to heal divisions among the world’s religions and to respect believers of all faiths, a hymn like “Onward Christian Soldiers” stirs people’s emotions and sometimes people’s worst inclinations. It has been used to divide us one from the other.

But there are people past who have felt like they were soldiers marching as to war. Not into war with unbelievers, but to war with their own church. And that is why I am standing over here by these windows. This south side aisle of the sanctuary is filled with stained glass pictures of people who had to fight their own church and their fellow Christians for what they believed in. There is Joan of Arc, St. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther and these three guys right here in the windows that are framed by the center arch. These three are Bible translators: Jerome, Wycliffe and Tyndale.

Jerome lived around 400 years after the birth of Christ. He was born in what is now Slovenia and translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin for the first time. He risked his reputation in doing this. There were many church authorities who resisted his efforts, believing the sacred texts should remain in the original languages. But he had it pretty easy compared to the other two translators here.

John Wycliffe is sometimes called the Morning Star of the Protestant Reformation. An Oxford scholar and preacher, he was a critic of his church in the 14th Century, almost 200 years before the Reformation. He translated the Bible into English for the very first time, making it available to be read by the people, not just by the authorities of the Church, who by this time were quite happy to have the Bible only available in Jerome’s Latin, a dead language understood only by

church hierarchy and academic scholars.

Wycliffe's work did not sit well with church authorities or government authorities either who had little respect for the individual believer's conscience. They were, in fact, threatened by it. Both religious and secular authorities much preferred to interpret the Bible to the people as they saw fit and to their own benefit. Wycliffe was declared a stiff-necked heretic by the church. When he died all of his books and Bibles were burned in the town square in Oxford.

William Tyndale lived at the time of the 16th Century Reformation. He also translated the Bible into English and because of Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, his translation was printed in large quantities and thus was first made available to many more common, ordinary Christians. Like Wycliffe, Tyndale marched as to war with the authorities. Condemned by King Henry VIII, he was burned at the stake as a heretic. However, his translation eventually found its way into what we know as the King James Version of the Bible in the 17th Century.

The builders of this sanctuary wanted us to remember these three men. Why? Because it is hard for us to imagine that people have actually lost their lives for the Bible, of all things. Two of these men literally gave up their lives for God's Word and were condemned by an alliance of church and state. It is no wonder then that Martin Luther wrote those words we sing in the hymn "A Mighty Fortress" - "that Word above all earthly powers no thanks to them abideth." No thanks to them...abideth.

That is the "Word Above All Earthly Powers" that is read from this lectern up here where I am now standing and preached from that pulpit over here. It is that Word that holds Jeff Carlson and Avena Ward and me and anyone else who speaks from this pulpit accountable to what is read from this lectern.

On the front of the lectern is a symbol. A torch. A lamp. A light. God's Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path through life. That's what the psalmist said (Psalm 119). And Jesus said that when we are hearers and doers of the Word, we ourselves become the light of the world. A light we must not hide. As we show others with our lives how Christians live. Each of us carries the torch out into the worlds in which we live.

As pilgrims set off for the new land of America in the 17th Century, an English bishop named John Robinson gave them these words for inspiration: "God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy word." The Word of God is not written in a dead language. There is more and more and more to be learned every day in every time and place and culture. That is called continuing revelation. God did not stop speaking in the 1st century or the 14th century or the 16th century or the 20th century. God is still speaking. There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's Word. At St. Pauls, the Bible is the foundation of our faith. But we don't live in the foundation. We build upon it, letting God's Word be our light, a lamp to light our path as we go forward through the ages. What is read from this lectern must be translated and interpreted by you and me in our own lives.

On the other side of this chancel is the pulpit. It is rather high and lifted up. Although not nearly so much as in some churches or even in St. Pauls earlier church building on this site. An older

member of our congregation remembers that when we was a child he actually looked forward to the sermon every Sunday. (Can you believe that?!) His family worshiped in the 1898 church building that burned in 1955, and he waited each Sunday for the pastor, who was Dr. Gerhard Grauer at that time, to emerge from behind a purple velvet curtain and stand at the pulpit, which was actually a small balcony, high up, reached by a hidden spiral staircase.

There actually is symbolism to a pulpit that is high up, although you will not find an elevated pulpit in most contemporary churches built today. But the designers of sanctuaries from ages past believed the raised pulpit to be a sign of the authority of the Word of God being preached. That there was a specialness to the sermon. An awesomeness, if you will.

We modern preachers have some real hang-ups with that which is why in some churches pulpits have disappeared. We have seen how easily authority can be twisted into authoritarianism. (You people do as I say! Because I know what is good and right for you. And only I really know the Bible.) How easy and convenient it can be to go from elevating the Word of God to inflating the preacher's ego! However, I have to say there can be elevated egos in preachers standing at any level. It was this authoritarian bent in church authorities of the 14th and 16th centuries that got Wycliffe and Tyndale in trouble with them. The clergy didn't trust the people of their churches to be able to handle the Word of God.

In order to add our own symbolism to the time of the sermon on Sunday, St. Pauls pastors and preachers do not sit up front in some throne at the altar, but we sit with the congregation and come up here to preach. We are called out from the congregation for a specific task. We preach from a pulpit that is in the shape of a communion cup. A chalice. Did you ever notice that? We stand in a bowl at the top of a stem. Another symbolic reminder that preacher and congregation are in this thing together, in communion with God and one another.

And we preach from a pulpit that has a rather powerful and sometimes disturbing symbol on the front it. On the front of this pulpit there is a Bible. That's fine. But there is also a sword slicing right through the middle of that Bible. The Word of God "is sharper than any two-edged sword" said the writer of the book of Hebrews (Hebrews 4). In other words, and to put it bluntly, it cuts through the crap. It judges us, all of us, preacher included. "It judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

And that is at least part of what a sermon is supposed to do. Like a surgeon's knife, it cuts into our lives and removes that which is making us sick in body and soul. What some of you already know is that I preach most of my sermons to myself because what is read over there at the lectern informs and judges me as well as you. And heals us. The torch is accompanied by the sword. There is a light for our path and a surgeon's knife as well.

This symbol on the pulpit has come to be known as the symbol of this church's patron saint, St. Paul. In the letter to the Ephesians (Ephesians 6), it is written that the Word of God is the "sword of the Spirit." This is the sword that the prophet Simeon spoke about when he held the young Jesus in his arms and said to Mary and Joseph, he will be "the sword to pierce your soul." (Luke 2)

This is the sword that Jesus spoke of when he said to his disciples, “ I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” A sword that can even divide family member from family member and friend from friend. Just as it divided Wycliffe and Tyndale and Martin Luther and others from their own church. That is a troubling pronouncement that Jesus made. One that I personally would rather not think about.

However, that pronouncement of Jesus brings to my mind a quote from a legendary college football coach, who once told his players, “Jesus said that the meek shall inherit the earth, but Jesus himself was not meek on the football field.” So, there you go. I didn’t even know Jesus played football! Yet, Jesus pronouncement that he brings not peace but a sword would seem to confirm the coach’s outrageous charge.

I like Jesus better as the Prince of Peace, and I admit to being disturbed and kind of frightened when he says that he brings a sword. That is why the sword on the front of this pulpit is troubling as well. I think of it right there in front of me when I preach because I have to be as faithful as I can be to what has just been read over there at the lectern, realizing that God’s Word can divide us at times. And that you and I both have believer’s consciences. Both you and I are responsible to God for how we interpret God’s Word and live it out. A torch and a sword. The Word of God.

That lectern and this pulpit are very important pieces of furniture filled with symbolism in and of themselves. But neither one is at the center of this sanctuary. In church architecture lingo this is called a divided chancel. In some churches, the pulpit is smack dead in the center and that has its own symbolism. But here at St. Pauls, between the torch and the sword is the altar. Since very early times, an altar has been a symbol of God’s presence. That is why the pastors and acolytes process to the altar on Sundays. That procession itself is symbolic. That is why the pastor turns to the altar for the prayer of confession. For we all come before God in confession. You are not confessing to me, standing facing you. But we all confess to God. That is why the choir turns toward the altar for the statement of faith. We all confess our faith together to God.

There are many ways for a congregation of people to worship God. In a circle facing one another. Standing side by side holding hands. Gathered around a communion table. But what is symbolic about our worship in this sanctuary (and in many traditional sanctuaries) is that we face the altar. Symbolically we face God head on. Each of us. And all of us together. Think about that. Imagine as you sing hymns and speak words that you are singing and speaking to God. It is not to one another but to God to whom our worship is directed.

God is the audience for our voices, for our hymns and our prayers. That is kind of awesome. So, let all we do praise the Lord!

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TEXTS FOR SERMON

Matthew 5:13-16

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 10:32-39

Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.