

“Martyrs”

Psalm 46; Acts 6:8-14

July 14, 2024

Introduction

- To begin this morning, I want to talk about one of my favorite theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
- Dietrich was a German man, born in the late 1906 and studied theology.
- He was, unfortunately working in Germany at the dawn of Hitler’s rise to power.
- He, along with others, signed what’s known as the Barmen Declaration.
 - o Probably the greatest piece of theology of the 20th century, I’m not kidding.
 - o It’s short and worth the read. Basically, it’s a diatribe against toxic nationalism like the Nazis were practicing.
 - o It elevates hearing the Word over all politics. Like I said, it’s brilliant.
- But after having written the declaration, many, including Bonhoeffer, fled Germany and the continent.
 - o Barth, for example, headed to England, then to the United States.
- Bonhoeffer, like the others, left but then did something extraordinary.
 - o He returned.
 - But get this, he returned knowing the Nazis already didn’t like him.
 - That’s not the best time to return, right?
- Bonhoeffer’s end.
 - o Well, he didn’t lay down. He began an underground seminary for revolting pastors at Frankenwilde.
 - This was an amazing risk but believing the people were being led astray by Nazi approved pastors, he did so valiantly.
 - o This though ultimately led to his arrest and, death.
- Bonhoeffer writes some brilliant material waiting for death.
 - o He talked about life being like held in prison and that one day, God would come to liberate us from this place Himself.
- Tertullian, generations before, a Christian father once wrote, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” and how true a statement that is.
 - o Many people have come to Christ through Bonhoeffer’s teachings.
 - Not perfect, but perfectly poised to do God’s work on a maximal level.

Turn to the Word

- I begin with Bonhoeffer because we’re going to be talking about Acts chapter six again this week.
- Last week, we look at the beginning part of chapter six.
 - o Recap last week’s sermon.
- Now, however, we get to see what happens following that.
- Stephen and the Apostles are out doing the Lord’s work, stirring up the people.
 - o We know that they’re doing miracles and thousands are joining the movement every day.
 - o But this is creating controversy in the synagogues.
- Stephen, a Hellenistic Jew, has obviously gotten under the skin of some of the other Hellenistic Jews.
 - o They report him to the Sanhedrin with, get this, false charges of blasphemy.
 - Now that should sound familiar.
 - That’s right, this is the same group doing the same things that it did to Jesus before they killed Him.
 - We should hear this as a bit of a foreshadowing of what’s to come.
- Stephen is taken, arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin.
- He then delivers the longest sermon in Acts.
 - o But again, like every sermon in Acts, it has a definite form and structure.

- This one, the longest in acts, tears down three pillars in the Jewish faith.
 - The Land, the Law and the Temple.
- You see, Jews had become somewhat smug in their relationship with God figuring they had all the blessings.
 - They were living in Israel.
 - The people at the time believed God favored only people who lived in the land.
 - They were obeying the Law.
 - But Jesus showed them they weren't doing that terribly well but they placed their certainty on their adherence to the Law.
 - They were attending the Temple.
 - They thought this placed them in a class above other people.
- Stephen's sermon
 - Goes against every one of those as being anchors to know our salvation.
 - It's a brilliant sermon that would've astounded the crowds.
 - Stephen's knowledge of Scripture and the history of God's people comes shining through the text.
 - It's an amazing sermon that leaves you with one key awareness.
 - YOU NEED A SAVIOR.

Comfort

- It's always easy when things are comfortable to lose track of the real important stuff in life.
 - Like many of those Jews in the era before, I wonder how many of us live comfortably, without much energy for Jesus.
 - After all, most of us have homes, land that is, a place where we can go to lay our heads.
 - Since we do, sometimes we lose track of our Christian priorities.
 - Sometimes, don't we all just think that knowing a little bit about Jesus Christ is enough?
 - We rest comfortably sometimes for the same reasons as the Jews of the time.
 - Do we overlook that we need a savior?
 - Because a day is surely coming, one none of us can avoid should the Kingdom not arrive first.
 - The truth is that, although we live, someday, we will die.
 - And when we do, it isn't our land, isn't the country we've lived in, it isn't the stuff we've amassed or even the experiences that we've had. Our salvation comes down to one name and one name alone.
 - Jesus
 - The name that is greater than every name.
 - The person who holds more power than we can even fathom.
 - I've really gotten into science in the last couple of years as showing the handiwork of God.
 - When you even try to get your hands around something like the entire cosmos, you've got to see the hand of supreme power.
 - Jesus is our Savior
 - Jesus is the One who takes away our sins so that we can exist eternally in the Kingdom of God.
 - Not as spirits but as fully enfolded living breathing beings for all eternity in a place where there is so sadness, no sickness, no death.
 - And the terms He sets are pretty light.
 - Believe and confess Jesus is Lord and the God raised Him from the dead.
 - That's all it takes.
 - And when you've got it, you've really got it.
- And when you've got it...
- Grace changes you.

- First, it fills you with a new kind of life, a new way of seeing the world.
- But then, it emboldens you, makes you do and say things maybe you'd not quite believe.
- I'm reminded here of the story of Jim Eliot.
 - o He and a group of his friends felt the call to evangelize an indigenous tribe of people in Ecuador known as the Akuas.
 - o They studied at Wheaton College for their preparation.
 - o They began using an aircraft to deliver gifts weeks before their arrival.
- Then after weeks of gift-giving, the men arrived and set up a camp on a local beach.
 - o At first, they were received warmly, even exchanging more gifts with the indigenous people.
 - o But the next night, a group of warriors came and killed all the members of the party.
- Tertullian said it best though.
 - o "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."
- Their widows went back and did the deal with others.
- Now Christianity is prevalent among that tribe but beyond that, they're peaceful will all peoples now.