

Keeping the Faith

By Rev. Sheryl Stewart

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 2 Timothy 2: 8-15 Luke 17: 11-19

When Israel was conquered by Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar had the most educated and skilled people, all the leaders he could find, and their families taken into Babylonia. Instead of making them slaves, he honored them and gave them rewarding, interesting, and important work, but he insisted they only speak the language of his nation and follow Babylonian customs of dress and behavior. In this way, the king reasoned, in a few generations, the Jews would forget they were Jews and become just like all the other Babylonians.

Instead of encouraging them to rebel, God's message was to keep their identity, their worship, and as many customs as were legal, to work hard, and be blessings in this foreign nation. They were not to fight; God himself would return them home at the right time. This worked and when Cyrus, leader of the Medes and Persians, conquered Babylonia, the Jews were freed and were able to return and rebuild Jerusalem.

They kept the faith. The Apostle Paul also kept the faith. Even though he was sent to prison in Rome and put in chains to stop him from traveling and building new churches, he just kept talking about Jesus! In time, people came to hear him and a Roman church formed. Today, there is no Roman Empire, but the Vatican has more moral power and respect than the superpower nations.

I have one more example of keeping the faith. Instead of going through something bad, all ten of those lepers Jesus spoke to were healed, but only one returned to Jesus to thank God. That one, even though he was a foreigner, was the only one who got to hear Jesus say, “Your faith has made you whole.”

Here we find three examples of faith-keeping: captives in Babylonia, a prisoner in Rome, and a foreigner in Israel. They all kept, or found, an identity as God’s people and therefore received God’s blessings.

There are many voices asking us to take sides today. The sides we are called to take are increasingly angry at each other and there are calls for violence. Acts of division and hatred are in the news all the time.

White is set against black, Christian is set against Moslem. Democrats and Republicans behave like cats and dogs! Patriots, in many nations, fear and reject immigrants and refugees. Corporations are opposed to indigenous peoples. Profit and superstitions are set against whole species of animals, risking elephants, rhinos, narwhals and an endless list for dollars. Greedy prophets of power urge exploitation of natural resources while anxious activists and scientists warn of ruinous pollution and climate change. Everyone is taking angry sides. Instead, we want these people to return and give God thanks

Boys are set against girls. You hear it on the playground: “Boys got cooties!” “No, girls got cooties!” Do you want to know who’s got cooties? It’s all those people saying other folk got cooties! And, we want them here, too!

In the midst of all these calls to be partisan, we believe God calls us to unity and an open welcome to every outsider. We are called to keep the faith, to be blessings to each other and to God's world. Amid cries of fear, suspicion, and hate, we return here to worship and give God thanks. When you hear about the healed leper who returned to praise God, you should see yourselves because that is the choice you made this Sunday!

This is not the time to throw stones but to gather people together and evangelize. This is not a time to call on God for vengeance, but a time to be healed and thankful. Only on this path will we hear Jesus say, "You can go now; your faith has made you whole." Let's spread the invitation to keep the faith; that is our only true hope. Amen!