

SERMON: Commitment and Completion
TEXT: Luke 23:44-56

4-3-22

A photo I saw on ChristianityToday.com shows a woman standing in the center of a large, grayish-white corridor. She's wearing a heavy winter coat that hangs down to her ankles where fur-lined winter boots provide protection down to her toes. Her hands are clasped in front of her and she's looking up at the arched ceiling. Her bright eyes, along with a slight smile give her a look of serenity and peace.

The tile floor along both walls is lined with blankets, air mattresses, luggage totes, bottled water, and plastic shopping bags. Just behind the woman, placed right in the center of the floor is a camouflage tent with a small rug in front of the opening. Further down the corridor is a crowd of people, most of them standing in place, as if they are watching an event or listening to someone speaking.

The caption below the photo identifies the space as a subway in Kyiv, Ukraine, which is being used as a bomb shelter. The article, written by Benjamin Morrison and dated March 3, 2022, is titled, *Bomb Shelter Ministry in My Ukrainian Town*.

Morrison writes, “...*whenever we head to the bomb shelter, my family and I take the opportunity to share the hope of Christ with our neighbors.*”

‘Bomb shelter ministry is, I must admit, not a ministry profile I thought I’d ever have’ he continues. “*And yet, we are already seeing how fruitful it’s been. Our neighbors have heard more about Christ, heard more Scripture, and been led in more prayer in the last week than most of them probably have in their lives.*”

In addition to the “Our Father” prayer, I’ve taken to reading various Psalms with them—a particularly fitting book for us in Ukraine, as David often cries out amid being hunted by his enemies....

This ministry includes taking in refugees, as well. In Morrison’s words, “*The brutal bombing of civilian targets in Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second largest city, has led to another wave of refugees over the last 24 hours. Previously the targets had been mostly military. This meant that our church welcomed 16 more refugees tonight, 10 in our building and 6 with a family from our church.*”

One of the young fathers of the families who stayed in our church is into Hindu spirituality and had a lot of great questions about Christianity. I ended up talking with him about what makes the gospel different from other religions (i.e., grace) for nearly an hour. I think he came to see Christianity in a new light. We exchanged numbers to stay in contact as they head further west in the coming days.

This is the case with most refugees who make it this far. We are just an inn for weary travelers on the way. But we hope to serve them and help them experience the love and peace of Christ, even if only for a few hours. It is not our job to force them into faith—an evangelistic approach that rarely produces good results. Rather, we will play whatever role God grants us: to plant a seed, to water—or to harvest when ready. [God] is the one who brings the fruit in his time, and we can rest in that.”

This is a beautiful story of commitment and service among all the tragic stories of brutality and indiscriminate destruction that are coming out of Ukraine since Russia began their attack. Though I must admit, my knee-jerk reaction to the idea of a Bomb Shelter Ministry is to wonder how anyone can think of ministry when their lives are in danger. But before I even finish that thought another one takes its place: what better time for ministry but when people’s lives are in danger? When you’ve lost everything, or think you might lose everything, the gift of faith is something no one can steal. Jesus is the knot you can hang on to when you’ve reached the end of your rope.

Since the season of Lent began, I have been exploring the different characters who play a role in the days of Jesus’ passion. First, it was Judas, who lost his faith in Jesus and betrayed him. Then came Peter, who had proclaimed that he would die for Jesus, then denied knowing him. Pontius Pilate believed Jesus

was innocent, but gave the order for him to be executed. And one of the criminals who was crucified with him, found his faith in the final moments of his life. All of them had some level of commitment to Jesus.

Now, as Jesus breathes his final breath, he expresses his own commitment and trust in God. His final words are a quote from Psalm 31:5: “Father, into your hands, I commend (or commit) my spirit.”

The familiar phrase, “it is finished,” is not found in the gospel of Luke, but only that “[Jesus] breathed his last.” The earthly ministry of Jesus is complete in his death. One theologian cautioned, “Perhaps it is good not to dispel the darkness of the death of Jesus too quickly. We naturally move on to wonder at the love of God revealed in the death of Jesus or to translate its meaning into sacrificial terms... or to press on to the next chapter - to the resurrection.... Only by witnessing the darkness of his death and the despair of the loss of hope can we fully appreciate the joy of the resurrection.” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, Luke, John)

Jesus has died, and though his earthly ministry is complete, he will continue to be influential to billions of people until the end of time. We owe this in part to those witnesses who were there. From a Roman soldier to a member of the

Sanhedrin to unnamed people in the crowd we find commitment that inspires generations to come.

“The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, ‘Surely this was a righteous man’.” Not only was he pronouncing that Jesus was innocent, as Pontius Pilate had, but he affirms that Jesus was good and just.

The people in the crowd were not all jeering and mocking, as we might imagine. Some were quietly, faithfully present with Jesus in his hour of death. Though his disciples had deserted him earlier, perhaps some had returned to join with others who had gathered to witness this sight. All in this crowd went away beating their breasts in grief and self-condemnation after he died.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize - even though we rarely hear about them - that there were women who had followed Jesus. Women were witnesses to his death and watched while his body was removed from the cross and laid in the tomb. Women were the first to arrive to find the tomb empty. Women were the first witnesses of his resurrection.

Finally, there was Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Council - the Sanhedrin - who had not agreed that Jesus should be put to death. It was a courageous thing to approach Pilate and ask for Jesus' body so that he could put it in a tomb. Sharing more from the commentary: "Joseph of Arimathea is a minor character in the Gospels, but one whose name will be remembered throughout history for one decent act. Was he moved by a raging sense of injustice at the death of Jesus (23:51), by devotion to the Lord he had feared to confess openly (John 19:38)? Or was he simply moved to do a decent and compassionate thing? We may never know, but how could he have ever known that, even though he was a man of some distinction in his own time, he would be remembered for all time for this one compassionate act? It would not be a bad thing to be remembered as one who did something good and decent." (The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, Luke, John)

Moving forward, we know that the story is not complete, and we are so ready to celebrate the resurrection. But we are called to go beyond celebration to share our own commitment to Jesus. The story continues with us and within us. To serve others as we would serve him. To do that one decent and compassionate act for others, whenever we see the opportunity. To recognize that as we live out our commitment and share Christ's undying love in the best of times and in the worst of times, it does make a difference.

Fellow believers, our work is never complete. May we continue to inspire those around us by our undying commitment... to the glory of God!

AMEN.