

“Hope and Witness in Dangerous Times”

First Friends Meeting

August 29, 2021

Isaiah 62:1-3

We’re living in dangerous times. Shortly after I first wrote that sentence, which felt to be deeply true, I began to reflect on it a bit. My whole life has been lived in dangerous times. The Red Scare. Duck and cover drills. The deterioration of the environment in the 50s and 60s. The Vietnam War. And on and on and on up to the present day.

I don’t guess that these times are unusually dangerous – just ask the early Christians about danger. Most of us are in no danger of being herded into the coliseum to be eaten by lions or being martyred by empire.

Most of us North American Quakers, that is. Ask our Friends and other Christians around the world about their situation.

Still, dangerous times call for both Christian witness and hope. And yet, what good words and actions are we offering to a hurting and dangerous world?

Some Christians posit that we have to be on the front lines of political action. As my friend Noel Paul Stookey best known as “Paul” of “Peter, Paul, and Mary”, a person of deep faith, sings, “Have you been to jail for justice.” Frankly, no, I haven’t.

Other Christians say that this world is not our home. We're just passing through and so our attention needs to be centered on our and others' spiritual lives. Let's get right with God and trust in the slow work of God's eternal justice and reconciliation.

These two extremes have always felt a bit uncomfortable to me. Either/or propositions. Be this or be that. Be activists or be concerned with spirituality.

Why not both? That is probably why I resonate with William Penn's statement that "True godliness don't turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavours to mend it... Christians should keep the helm and guide the vessel to its port; not meanly steal out at the stern of the world and leave those that are in it without a pilot to be driven by the fury of evil times upon the rock or sand of ruin."

His words, though 300+ years old and written by a man who had his own failings, provide a model for those of us today. We need both deep godliness and an understanding that our personal and corporate faith means that we will be active in work that heals this world.

Every January we honor the life of one of those Christians who lived Penn's words. Martin Luther King, Jr. He anchored his civil rights work in scripture and in the sort of non-violence that Jesus advocated and model. He stayed at the helm and guided his work with those principles always in view. And though today he is

widely acclaimed, we should remember that during his life, he was often reviled.

Many whites resented his civil rights work and felt that things were fine and should be left alone. As time wore on, a number of Blacks felt that his non-violent methods were too slow and that radical revolutionary tactics were necessary. Further, as King grew in his faith and vision, he began to comprehend the links between civil rights, poverty, and the Vietnam war. When he came out against the war, he lost even more white support.

Yet still he pressed on. With a faithful prophetic witness and hope. April 3, 1968 he ended a speech with these words:

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

The next day he was felled by an assassin's bullet.

Just how this witness and hope will look like will be different for each of us. If I've learned anything about the Jesus way over these years (and I hope I have!) is that there is no one size fits all answer to what it means to be a person of faith. We have to examine what our hope and witness in this world is to be. For some of us it might be the grounding work of contemplation and prayer that supports the efforts of those on the front-lines of the Lamb's War. For others it might be to become, in the words of the Quaker civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, "angelic troublemakers." For many of us, it may well be some combination that may not have occurred to us up until now.

British Quaker Roger Wilson says, "As Christians we need to see ourselves as God's plumbers, working on tanks and channels for the living water that can quicken the daily life of men, women and children... Jesus taught us about patterns of living that make for wholeness as we and our neighbours care for one another and build one another up. And all the patterns that Jesus showed us of cisterns and channels of caring and service challenge the patterns of Mammon that offer quicker and more showy results, but that end in the debris of a possessive society that allows the living water to run away into the sand. Good plumbers build to last; they don't fall for fashions that rust and fade and crack.

How can we be good plumbers in these times of faulty, corroding pipes?  
How can our lives and spiritual work demonstrate:

- Love
- Peace
- Joy
- Gentleness
- Goodness
- Faithfulness
- Long suffering
- Meekness

in a world that feels bereft of most of those qualities?

The above are all positive things. Hopeful things. They help us live into the words of the great prophet priest Oscar Romero who once said, "I don't want to be an anti, against anybody. I simply want to be the builder of a great affirmation: the affirmation of God, who loves us and who wants to save us."

Our witness and hope should be rooted in such a great affirmation.

I invite you to consider how your personal faith life better enables you to live in these dangerous times and how it moves you to work at mending the world. How do your spiritual beliefs empower you to help guide the vessel of the world and its people in a good and safe direction?

Our faith, after all, is not just about the hereafter, but is also about the here.

If faith matters, it has to matter now!