

“Bring Forth What is Within You”
A Sermon for Synod Assembly Opening Worship

Based on Luke 24:44-53

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By Bishop Wayne N. Miller

Sermon begins with the preacher displaying a 12 ounce carbonated beverage can.

I think that it is pretty generally known, but just in case you haven't heard... prior to returning to seminary in the early 1980's, I worked for a while as a project engineer for the National Can Corporation. I was one of the people who designed the tooling that was used to make these common beverage cans.

He shakes the can repeatedly as he describes it...

And I have to say that even though most of us take these cans as commonplace, once you've been involved in designing one, it is a piece of fine jewelry. Just to think that this little piece of aluminum has been carefully ironed to a thickness of less than 3 thousandths of an inch, perfectly uniform so as not to create weak spots... and then the dome at the bottom which has to be arched in just exactly the right way so that it will not be blown out by the pressurized contents of the can.

Continues to shake the can...

But most amazing of all, of course, is the lid of the can that not only has to resist that pressure, but it has to be made with this little circle called a “pop top” in which the aluminum is partially perforated to precisely the right depth to hold the integrity of the containment while at the same time being able to tear loose at the desired moment to allow those contents to escape. Perforate too little and the refreshing beverage is trapped forever... perforate too much and, “Kablou!” your can becomes a small bomb. All I can say is, “Thank Goodness!!” Thank Goodness we can all rely on the precision of human technology to protect us from the danger of certain liquids under pressure suddenly blowing up their containers and spilling out into places we don't want them to be!!

Continues to shake the can...

And all this technology just to give a temporary home to a tasteless, orderless, invisible gas called carbon dioxide... a material that none of you have ever seen... and yet... judging from the look of terror in all of your eyes as you watch me shake this can... you are all quite convinced that it is in there.

It is a simple enough problem to solve, of course. I mean all you really need to do is just to put the can on a shelf in a nice cool place, and eventually all that energy simmers down and becomes quiet and harmless again. In fact if you let it sit still for long enough it might even exceed the shelf life of the bubbles... and then all the promise of energy and refreshment promised on the label of the can simply fades into a distant memory living below the surface of a dull, flat reality... so is the mission of the can fulfilled by what it contains, or by what it conveys?

As you know, the theme for this assembly is, “You Shall Be My Witnesses.” So it is worth taking a minute or two to consider what we really mean by this word, “witness,” a comfortably euphemistic translation of the Greek word, “martyr.”

In common speech we use the word “witness” to refer to the experience of seeing or perhaps hearing something significant. To witness a crime, is to see it take place, and maybe to know who “done” it. To witness history is to be there in Grant Park on election night or to be sitting in front of the TV set when the great twin towers crumbled to dust. But is that all? Is seeing, or hearing, or merely being there all that there is to being a witness?

The scripture readings chosen for this morning are the texts appointed for the festival of St. Luke, Evangelist. And as such, they carry the deep memory that even though I have no doubt that Luke saw and heard quite a lot on his journey... and even though the scriptural witness is quite clear that he was really there... we do not remember him for where he was or what he saw and heard. We honor him because of what he TOLD. We honored him because of the experiences and the stories and the words that poured out of him.

Today Luke reminds us all of the simple truth that though many people heard and saw the things that happened in Jerusalem and Judea... even though many were there... only a few actually became witnesses to these things.

Today, through our remembrance of Luke's witness, we celebrate the evangelists and apostles the saints and above all the martyrs... the witnesses who could not contain what had been poured into them, but who instead flipped their lids and poured themselves out, body, mind, and soul, for the one who had poured himself out for the world.

And we, sisters and brothers, are the heirs of this witness. We are the saints of this present age who have been filled with the energy and refreshment of a life that cannot be killed.

But, truthfully, I have days when I wonder... I wonder if we Lutherans have exceeded our shelf life. We have been sitting quietly in our cool corner of the world for so long, not wanting to call too much attention to ourselves... engineering a sort of private witness protection program, there in plain sight, and yet strangely tasteless and invisible...not quite ready to take the risk to pour ourselves out... not quite sure if what we have seen and heard is still a river of life and energy and hope for a parched land... or if instead others might begin to see us as people who have flipped our lids... and then receive our witness as a toxic spill to be contained at all costs... or at least cleaned up as quickly as possible.

So this weekend we take just a few precious hours together to shake the container... We take a few precious hours to see and to hear and to celebrate the amazing ways in which this Church of ours is taking the risk... the ways in which we are shaking the world up with our work and our witness... the ways in which we are still pouring ourselves out for the sake of the one who poured himself out for the whole creation.

But we don't stop there. We shake the container again... in an attempt to discover what might still be sleeping and waiting to be awakened in there behind the label of this quiet conventional Christianity of ours.

And we must do this. Because this Church that was born and raised on BLIND FAITH cannot live long on BLAND FAITH. There is still a great torrent of life trying to rush into this world... even though many cannot quite see or hear or taste it yet...a life that even the tomb cannot contain. But they will never know the power of its refreshment unless we, you and I, are ready now to open ourselves now to become witnesses to these things.

Amen.