

# St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA

✠ Seventh Sunday of Easter ✠

May 28, 2006

*Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe*

**“When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.**

**“All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. I did not tell you this at first because I was with you.”**

(John 15:26-16:4, NIV)

Times of transition usually lead people to look back and look forward. On New Year's Eve we recall the past year and we look ahead to the coming year. At the end of a school year students, teachers, and parents alike might evaluate the past year and start planning the next. If you change jobs or occupations, it's just natural to think about the past as well as to look into the future.

For Jesus' disciples, the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost were a time of transition between being with Jesus on earth and being Jesus' witnesses in the world. He was no longer with them physically, but he had not yet sent the Holy Spirit. No doubt the disciples used this time of transition to look back at all the things that happened in the past three years and all the things Jesus said to them. But they were also looking forward to all the things that would happen in the coming years. “You are my witnesses,” Jesus said. But what does that mean? And “I will send you my Spirit.” But why do we need that? In our text for today, words spoken on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus explained to the disciples what he meant. **“You are my witnesses.”** **That means that you will speak the truth, you will be surrounded by lies, and you will be strengthened by the Spirit.**

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his disciples, **“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** According to St. Luke, these were Jesus' final words to his disciples. These were the words left ringing in their ears as Jesus disappeared from their sight **“You will be my witnesses.”** And I have to wonder whether these words brought to mind these words from our text: **“And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.”**

A witness is a person who is called in to testify to what they have seen or heard. Just think for a moment about all things the disciples had seen and heard over the past three years. They had seen Jesus do miracles – he healed people, he fed people, he calmed wind and wave and he walked on water. He had even raised the dead. They had seen Jesus harshly rebuke hardened sinners, but they had also seen him tenderly comfort penitent sinners. They saw him obedient to those in authority, but they had heard him speak with authority like none other. They saw him live impeccably. But they also saw him suffer and die like a criminal. But above all, they saw

him risen from the dead, just as he had said, and now they had also witnessed his ascension into heaven. They were witnesses of these things.

And Jesus called on these men to testify to what they had seen and heard – to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

We are not eyewitnesses of Jesus' life like the disciples. We weren't there. But Jesus still calls us to be witnesses of what we have seen and heard. Though we weren't actually there, through the eyes and ears of faith and by the record of Holy Scripture we were there. Just in the past months we have reviewed the facts of the case: we saw Jesus in the manger at Christmas. We saw him performing miracles in Epiphany. We saw him suffering in Lent and dying on Good Friday and rising from the dead on Easter Sunday. And just three days ago we celebrated Jesus' ascension. We saw him! We heard him! And Jesus calls us also to testify about him. To speak the truth of what we have seen and heard – nothing more, nothing less.

But you know as well as I know that this is not always so easy. And Jesus knew that as well. He knew it wouldn't be easy for his disciples to testify, so he said to them, **"All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you."**

The disciples were called to testify to the truth, but the enemy, Satan, is the Father of lies. He will not stand for the truth to be spoken unchallenged. So the disciples were going to face opposition, Jesus said, opposition that threatened to damage or destroy their faith. First, they would be put out of the synagogue.

For Jews of Jesus' day and for many early Christians, the synagogue was their place of worship, Bible study, prayer, and fellowship. It was their church. But because they spoke the truth of what they had seen and heard, Jesus said they would be put out, they would be excommunicated from the fellowship of the synagogue. They could no longer go and hear the Word of the Lord read on the Sabbath. They could no longer gather with their brothers and sisters and receive and give encouragement to each other. They were no longer welcome in the synagogue and they may have been led to believe that they didn't belong there, that God's Word and God's promises were not for them.

For the disciples, being put out of the synagogue was just the beginning. Some of them would be killed for their testimony. And Jesus says that those who kill you will actually think they are doing a service to God. The persecutors thought they were doing the right thing by getting rid of those pesky Christians. Don't you wonder how that could be? How they could be so far off as to think that murder was pleasing to God? Well Jesus explains why they did it. **"They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me."** They were willing to go so far as to kill these Christians because they had wrong ideas both about God the Father and about Jesus. Oh, they had good intentions, but they were wrong. They were influenced by a lie. And those lies destroyed the lives of Jesus' witnesses and threatened to destroy their faith as well.

Thankfully we don't suffer that kind of persecution today. We are free to gather together to worship and to proclaim our testimony to one another. We're also free to bind ourselves together in a congregation and jointly take our witness into our community and into the world. And the chances that we will die for our confession of the truth are rather slim (at least right now).

But don't think for a second that Satan has stopped lying. You don't have to be put out of the synagogue to wonder if maybe God's Word and promises aren't really for you. You may even sit here in church and hear the words, "Your sins are forgiven. You are a dear child of God" But

you think to yourself, "I'm not so sure. I don't think he would really say that if he knew what I've thought and what I've done." Satan works like crazy to convince you that you just don't belong here and that God doesn't really want you here. But it's a lie—a deadly lie.

And no one has to kill your body in order to attempt murder on your soul. The assailants may even have good intentions. They may say that they're looking out for your good. They don't want to upset you. They don't want to appear uncaring. So they simply don't say anything. They don't say anything about the way you treat God's gift of marriage like a cheap toy, something to play with for a while, but not worth keeping or taking care of. They won't say anything to you about how you're treating your body, or how you're managing your possessions, or how you're making use of the Word of God in your life and the life of your family. No one has said a word to you, but it's a lie—a deadly lie.

Or perhaps you see someone who is trapped in such a sin, and you know you should say something. But how will they respond? They might get angry. And so we don't say a word and behind all these things there is Satan, the world, and your sinful flesh, trying to lead you astray.

So what can witnesses of the truth do in a world surrounded by lies? Well, it looks like Jesus has worked that out for us. **"When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me."** Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to his disciples. Here he calls him "the Counselor." The word *counselor* is a technical term for someone who comes to the aid of another person, especially in the context of a court of law. This counselor would come to the aid of Jesus' witnesses. And what would he bring to help them? The truth. He is also called the Spirit of truth. This Spirit would strengthen them by leading them back to the truth which they had seen and heard.

It's not easy to be a Christian today. There are simply so many things that test us and try us; so many distractions and disillusionings; so many things that may make us wonder how our faith and our witness will ever survive. And that is what makes Jesus' promise here ever so precious. He sends us the Holy Spirit. He is our counselor, who comes to our aid against the opposition of the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. He is the Spirit of truth, who leads us back to the truth which we have learned from Holy Scripture. He leads us to believe that his Word and promises *are* for us. He leads us to love his Word and listen to his Word. In his Word we find our defense against the attacks on our souls by the lies of our enemies. And there we find strength to testify to what we have seen and heard.

The disciples were in a period of transition, a time unlike any other. So they looked back and they looked forward. As Christians we are always in a period of transition. We are always standing between what Jesus did for us and the paradise that he won for us. We're standing between the cross and the crown. So we look back to what Christ has done for us and what he has taught us. And we always look forward to the promises he has made to us, to send us his Spirit and finally to bring us to be with him forever.