

Listening for the Promise

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17) – September 1, 2024

“Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit ...”

–Ephesians 6:16–18a–

Testimony and Transformation

Julius Caesar first declared that January 1 be celebrated as New Year’s Day in the year 46 B.C. However, in my house—even though Julius and I share a birthday—“new year” always begins in September. It’s illogical, what with leaves turning and sunlight shortening, but culture-wide we spend a lot of autumn energy pressing the reset button: back to school, election day, and the annual full-court press into the holidays.

For Christians, all these new beginnings can be the season for good intentions, especially for public witness to our faith. “This year,” we say, “we want our light to shine so that others see Jesus in us.” The courageous among us may even think boldly, “We want our words to sound so that others hear God’s word through us.” Would that it were so.

Sadly, too many times we position ourselves and open our mouths, and all the world sees and hears is what’s inside us: self-righteousness, arrogance, and condescension. Our attempts to speak and act for God — at school, in the voting booth, and even in our holiday celebrations — are sounding brass and tinkling cymbals, absolutely at odds with God’s word.

Will we ever get it right? No, not this side of our resurrection. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t keep beginning again. Praying at all times in the Spirit and meditating on the written and incarnate Word of God shape us from the inside out, as God’s word enlightens our way and informs our understanding. Jesus tells us that it is not so much the darkness outside that we should fear, for against that we have the shield of faith. Instead, we should be wary of the darkness within, lest we further defile ourselves and dishonor our Lord in public witness.

The psalmist said, “Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them” (Psalm 119:129) — not perfectly, but in the strength of God’s might. We stand firm not in our righteousness but in the Lord’s alone. God is glorified when his word becomes our word and people see his character in us.