

Funeral Sermon for Helmut Koester

Saturday, January 16, 2016

Texts: Isaiah 51:7-11; 1 Cor. 15:53-58; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; Psalm 90:1-6,13-17; John 16:22-33

I.N.J.

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Brother. Amen.

I want to begin by thanking this congregation and this family for the privilege of preaching today. I'm grateful to the family for honoring Helmut's request that I be asked to preach, and to the pastors of this congregation for welcoming me as graciously as they have today.

This morning I took note of the well-written piece on the back of the service folder. I noticed the way the second paragraph begins: "At University Lutheran Church Professor Koester, an ordained Lutheran minister, *advised* generations of pastors and lay leaders on biblical interpretation and liturgical practice." I thought that was such a nice verb to use. Now let me tell you how it really was.

It was my privilege to serve in this community of faith as a pastor. I don't know, Archbishop Demetrios, how it is among your congregation; but in this one, before a pastor is called to serve that pastor must preach a "call sermon." The Sunday I came here to preach a call sermon, sitting right in front were Gisela and Helmut Koester. I preached. After the liturgy, I was greeting people at the door. This man comes up to me and says, "Good morning, Pastor Larsen. My name is Helmut Koester, and I teach New Testament at Harvard Divinity School. I will tell you when you get your exegesis wrong."

I want to begin with a brief exegesis, not of a text nor of stones, but of a man. During the past year, Helmut spent a lot of time with a book his dear friend Klaus Baltzer had sent him. *Wir sollten Helden sein*. "We Were Supposed to be Heroes." The book is a collection of brief reflections by people born in Germany between the years 1920 and 1930. The editor writes in his preface: "Many of these people grew up under the illusion that it was their personal good fortune to be young in a heroic time and to be permitted to struggle for a better future." Helmut and his cohort of young people were assured by the propagandists of the rising Nazi imperium that a golden age of peace and security would dawn through their heroic, violent participation in the struggle to subjugate Germany's enemies. The searing reflections in this essay collection chart the course of disillusionment among Helmut's peers: we were *supposed* to be heroes.

I doubt that Koester was ever completely taken in by the propaganda. But he grew up in that time, was shaped in that world, he was conscripted as a teenager, sent to a miserable island in the North Sea where he endured horrors, and ordered to fight heroically to the death to hold the

island against the Allies. Before he was twenty, he had traded in the mantle of hero for a POW's uniform and a lifelong, quiet dance with survivor's guilt.

We love this guy. We have been shaped by him in so many ways that it is difficult not to regard him as hero. ἔλυτο τὸν θεόν. And yet, this man cannot be understood, nor can his witness to the gospel be understood, apart from the recognition that through disillusionment he shed the path of imperial hero to embrace a very different kind of struggle.

I suspect this experience is part of what drew Helmut so mightily to Paul of Tarsus. Paul was supposed to be a hero. He was supposed to become a particular kind of religious warrior. He could boast of impeccable credentials, great training, a commission to violently persecute the church of God and destroy it. And yet, through an encounter with the risen, crucified Antihero of God, Paul became utterly disillusioned with the smoke of living in heroic times, and was freed for a different path.

We are here today because of love shared. We are here to thank God for the many, many ways in which Helmut Koester became a blessing in our lives: scholar, teacher, friend, husband, father, grandfather, lover of soup, music and martinis at Chang Sho, and of course, teller of excellent jokes. (My wife has warned me that I dare not tell any of his jokes from the pulpit.) The list is long. But, dear friends, let us not forget that the man would not have been the man we came to love except through the crucible years during which he was drawn through the eye of a particularly cruel needle.

It was only after he had been drawn through the needle's eye that Helmut met Rudolf Bultmann, whom God used to equip Helmut for the next chapter in his life. Bultmann did more than shape Helmut as a scholar. He also helped Helmut make theological and existential sense of things in the situation of post-World War II Christianity in Germany. In May of 1943, long before they had ever met, Bultmann preached a sermon on the very text from John 16 that Helmut selected for this service. The text gives us the final portion of Jesus' farewell to his friends as they sat at table on the night he was handed over.

Jesus concludes his valediction: *I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face tribulation. But take courage; I have conquered the world!* And then Bultmann says: "This is no cheap word of comfort, as though Jesus' own traversing of death and resurrection had spared us all sorrow and despair. It is rather a comfort and a warning at the same time – a warning which leads to comfort, to the only comfort possible; that we should take up our pain and despair as a sharing of the cross of Christ. To share in the cross of Christ means to surrender our wishes and plans to the will of God, so that we place under the shadow of the cross all that concerns us, our hopes and our work, our pain and despair. This means that together we enter the ultimate solitude of humanity before God, and, as Paul says, that we decree

the sentence of death on ourselves, so that we put our trust not in ourselves but in God who raises the dead. And just so, we gain a part in Christ's victory over the world."

Anithero!

Under the shadow of the cross, God continues to gather a new community around Jesus – a community which embodies a flickering glimpse of humanity's destiny. It is in this new community that God is weaving love and justice together in ways that sometimes give the world a fleeting image of the faithfulness of Jesus, a community in which the weapons of war are set aside in favor of faith, love, and hope. The future God has in store for us is present as we build one another up in this eschatological triad.

Helmut picked today's texts. His favorites: Isaiah, the Psalmist, Paul, and of course John. He selected them not to assure us of his own destiny beyond death. He was quite confident of the love of God promised to him that would embrace him now in mystery. He selected these texts, rather, to assure us about our destiny. And more, to assure us of the deep, abiding significance of what we do together in the name of the Lord. Isaiah, the Psalmist, Paul and John: they stand as a chorus calling to us across the ages in God's own voice: do not be afraid, take courage, build each other up. Because God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, you know that your labor is not in vain. So be steadfast and immovable in faith, love and hope.

At some point before you watch any football today, go home and pick up your Bible and read all of 1 Thessalonians 5. All of it. And then you will see exactly what Helmut had in mind for you in your lives together as a family, as a congregation, and as a community of scholars.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful. God will do this.

In Christ's name. Amen.

Donald S. Larsen