

The Great Tribulation

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [August 12, 1998](#) issue

I suppose we are in the minority now, but there are still some of us who preach on the saints of the church. Their names show up on liturgical calendars with a little “W” beside them if they died of natural causes or a little “R” if they were martyrs. This tells the clergy what color to wear at the small midweek services where their lives are remembered. The “W” is for “white” and the “R” is for “red,” as in blood. In the summer months there are a lot of “R’s” on the calendar, which can make a preacher’s mouth go dry.

There you are with the loyal band who come to church no matter what: the Daughters of the King who meet afterwards for lunch; the couple with the bed and breakfast who have to work most Sundays; the woman with the oxygen tank who feels less self-conscious coming to church on a weekday; and, of course, the altar guild member whose turn it is to clean up afterwards.

In most cases, it is a much smaller crowd than the one that watched Perpetua and her companions mangled by wild animals in the arena at Carthage, or that saw Laurence roasted alive on a gridiron in Rome. And yet these are the exemplars you must hold up to that small congregation: men and women who chose to die rather than to renounce their faith in Christ.

The closest thing I have seen to martyrdom in Clarkesville was the new cashier at the grocery store who wore a tie with Romans 1:16 on it: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel.” He was unusually cheerful and made a big effort to engage people while he scanned their groceries, which was a change from the sullen teenagers who related chiefly to their gum. When my turn came, he looked me in the eye and said, “How are you today?” as if he really wanted to know.

“I’m fine,” I said, although I did not feel half as fine as he looked. He was bursting with energy and goodwill. After he had taken my money and loaded my bags into the cart, he reached into the pocket of his red apron and pulled out an individually wrapped life-saver.

“You know who your life saver is, don’t you?” he asked me with a wink.

“I sure do,” I said, resisting the urge to wink back.

He was dear. He was earnest. The next time I went back, he was gone.

I am pretty sure no one asked him to renounce his faith. The store manager probably just asked him to keep it to himself, or to save it for church where people would not be so irritated by it. The man was not a threat, after all. He was just an embarrassment. The tie, the life-savers, even the unusual cheerfulness--they were all too much for people who just wanted to get through the line and go home. So the man who is not ashamed of the gospel is out there somewhere looking for work, which I imagine he has done a lot of in his life. His martyrdom, such as it is, takes the form of chronic unemployment.

It is not what Jesus warned us about. “Then they will hand you over to be tortured, and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name,” he said in Matthew’s Gospel (24:9). In the Sudan, maybe. In Pakistan, perhaps. But not where most of us live. The way things are shaping up where most of us live, the Great Tribulation is not likely to be a massive persecution of the Christian faith, but a massive dismissal of it as an irritant or an embarrassment or, worse, as something that does not even register on people’s screens anymore, as outdated as alchemy or the map of a flat world.

A dozen Christians will give you a dozen reasons why this is so. Because the church has come down with moral laryngitis. Because the culture has turned from God to Mammon. Because mainline denominations have become so preoccupied with self-preservation that the Holy Spirit has left them. Every answer comes with its own agenda, which may be why I prefer the questions.

Whenever we remember the martyrs of the church, some good questions are: What would we have to do, as Christians, to get ourselves killed? If we devoted ourselves entirely to being God’s friends, what kind of enemies might we make? Should we be sad or thankful that our opportunities for martyrdom are so few?

I never know how to end a sermon on a martyr’s day. I look out at those good, ordinary people--one of whom, I know, spends eight hours a day sitting with her homebound mother, another of whom drives his wife to another county for radiation therapy five days a week. What should I say to them? “God wants more of you! We

must all find something worth dying for!”

I cannot say that. The best I can manage is, “May we all find that which is worth living for, giving ourselves to it heart, body and mind, and refusing, under any circumstances, to be parted from it.” That is how all the martyrs started out, as best I can tell. They did not go hunting around for some way to die. They simply stumbled onto the way of life and decided never to forsake it, no matter what. The rest was out of their hands.

The Christian story is one in which fullness of life leads to death. That is just how it goes. If, in a world with clear rules about who deserves more life and who deserves less life, you keep insisting on more life for everyone, then there is a decent chance that you will get your own little “R” by your name. But this same story is one in which death’s door won’t stay shut. The life that leads up to it pushes back from the other side. It is a door that bulges with energy. It is a door that leaks light. Over and over again, that is what the martyrs say they see: not darkness but light.

The thing is, I think, to find the light now--to walk in it and soak it up and shine it around so that others may see. Then, when the darkness comes--in whatever form--we will be ready.