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Who Will Be a Witness?

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Psalm 47; Acts 1:1-12

We spend a lot of time and effort in the church on the front end of the gospel – the Christmas story – and a lot on Easter, but not much on the very end. What the Church calls the Ascension. We breeze past it on our way to Pentecost and on into summer.

At the start of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, which is a continuation of the gospel of Luke, we are given a window into the last moments of Jesus. His final words are an instruction, uttered just before he ascends to heaven – or “goes up with a shout” in the words of psalmist.

“So when they had come together, they asked Jesus, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’”

The disciples indicate here that they don’t quite understand the point of the resurrection of Jesus, let alone his entire ministry. They’re conflating their own desire for power in the worldly sense with what Jesus has in mind.

“Jesus replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” (Acts 1:6-9)

It is a dramatic ending, and clearly not what the followers of Jesus expected or wanted. You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. Not The kingdom will be restored to Israel, and you will be back on top very soon.

The words in Acts echo the Great Commission – the other final, gospel-ending story – at the conclusion of Matthew’s gospel, where Jesus tells his followers:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

Nothing there, either, that would have satisfied the disciples’ desire for a return to power. Both of these final scenes offer evidence one last time that Jesus is not interested in earthly power. His hope is to change the world in another way – by sharing the reality of the love and justice of God. Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and

resurrection constitute good news the likes of which the world had never seen or heard before. The story needs telling. Who will be a witness?

Christianity is not meant to be kept secret, although many of us treat it like that. We rarely talk about it. We could work closely with someone and never know they were persons of faith and active in a local church. We could go to neighborhood gatherings over the years and never mention that we're members or leaders in a local congregation.

Are we embarrassed by our faith? You may have heard the line: Preach the gospel at all times; if you must, use words. I'm afraid that lets us off the hook too easily. Of course, we should show our faith in how we live and in our decisions, but we can also use words. Why the reluctance? Would it feel as if we were boasting? Are we afraid of being taken for "one of those kinds of religious people?"

I admire my Roman Catholic and Jewish colleagues whose clothing or head coverings give them away. Like a Muslim woman in a hijab, they have no choice but to be public about their religion by the way they appear. I can get away with passing as "normal" and non-threatening. Blending in.

When I meet a new person, I often avoid saying what I do for a living because when they hear it, it often cuts off

conversation. Sometimes that can be a good thing. Maybe we should strategically deploy the mention of our faith.

My dad, who was also a Presbyterian minister, once went golfing with three strangers in Scotland. He was a visitor to the course, and they needed someone to complete a foursome. The three were raucous guys, drinking on the course, using foul language, telling off-color stories – and they kept asking my dad what he did for a living. He managed to avoid the question for the first nine holes.

But on the second nine, they insisted he tell them. Not being one to prevaricate, he finally said he was “in the life insurance business.” They asked the company name. My dad thought for a moment and said, “Eternal Life.”

“Hmmm,” they said, “Never heard of it.”

It was a very close game that day on the course. As they were teeing up on the 18th hole, my dad finally told them he was a Presbyterian minister. Needless to say, he won the golf game.

There’s a time and a place for witnessing to our faith, and even in that story there’s a kernel of what Jesus was aiming at: to be a witness to Jesus and his way should shake things up a bit.

The biblical Greek for witness is martyr. Its original meaning was simply someone who had seen or experienced something about which they were willing to

speak and tell others, and in the case of the early church, that meant talking about Jesus of Nazareth. But as persecutions of Christians began spreading through the Roman Empire, the followers of Jesus who were witnesses in places where that was prohibited were often arrested and, if they refused to recant, put to death. Martyr then became connected to dying for your faith.

Witnessing was dangerous business because it pointed to an alternate reality outside the control of the powers of the time. The first Christian martyr mentioned in scripture is Stephen, also known as the first deacon selected to serve the church. Stephen was simply a witness, and a good one at that. Read about him in the 6th and 7th chapters of Acts. He couldn't stop talking about Jesus, so they stoned him to death – the first martyr, as we understand the term today – to try to silence the good news of which he was an effective witness.

The biblical standard for witnessing to the faith, and that of the first Christians, is this: Does the story you're telling, the life you're living, challenge the way earthly power is being used against God's intentions for human community? Does your witnessing get you in "good trouble?"

That standard, which held for the first three centuries of the Church, changed abruptly for the early church in the year 312 when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and decreed that henceforth it would be the

religion of the empire. The church left the streets and villages and the edges of acceptability and came inside. Its role, which had been to critique the world around it, shifted largely to only being about spiritual matters and theological disputes. It was subsumed by political power and eventually became indistinguishable from empire – and the church has been burdened by its association with empire and colonial power ever since.

Whether in the creation of feudal systems that oppressed illiterate masses in the Middle Ages the Church was there, or in the conquest of indigenous lands the Church was there, or in the enslavement of African people the Church was there providing theological rationale, or in the exclusion of LGBTQ folk or the pushing aside of differently-abled persons or the control of women and their bodies, the Christian Church – or at least large parts of it – has been there, colluding with empire and embracing power that Jesus simply would not have recognized, let alone condoned.

Maybe that's why sometimes we don't want to out ourselves as Christians. Who wants to be part of such a witness?

The power Jesus refers to in Acts gives his followers the courage to witness to a reality outside empire – where dreams and angels are found, where a rainbow is a promise, where a boy uses a slingshot to fell a mythical giant, where water springs up in the desert and dry land

rejoices, where a child who is God-with-us is born in a garage behind a cheap motel to poor unwed parents, where those shunted aside are now included, where justice rolls down like waters, where healing happens and miracles abound and death is defeated by death itself and life breaks free of the tomb.

That power gives birth to the Church. That power summons those who would follow Jesus to give witness to it, no matter what it costs them. That power springs from love that cannot be kept at bay by forces at work in this world.

The Black spiritual that asks who will be a witness for my Lord? was sung by enslaved Africans and their descendants. They were on the receiving end of abuse by white society and its churches and economy, but the song knew something else. The song knew that the power God gives is beyond the reach of empire. In fact, it resists empire and subverts it. That story is gospel, and it needs telling, and in telling it and singing it and living it and trusting it, hope emerges. And that hope begins to bring the alternative reality of the reign of God to life among us.

Who will be a witness?

My grandmother, a faithful Baptist woman in small town Indiana, my mother's mother, was among the first people outside my immediate family I was aware of who intentionally witnessed to the love of God. Like a good

Baptist. She was a bona fide church lady, that is, her life centered around worship and Bible study and care for others. After my grandfather died, for the next 40 years she regularly made the rounds to those in need. Into her 90s she visited the “elderly” and those who were homebound – all because she felt compelled to tell the story. She was a witness, and I am here today at least in part because of her courage to follow Jesus.

At last week’s memorial service for Walter Mondale the family asked me to speak about the formative influences that shaped his life and service. Others, they said, would cover his contributions to Civil Rights and the women’s movement and stewardship of the earth. My role was to talk about the source of his commitments.

Like many of his fellow Westminster members, Fritz Mondale did not wear his religion on his sleeve, but that did not make him any less a witness to the gospel values of justice and equity, humility, and mutual love. His life and public service were steeped in biblical values. When the Carter-Mondale ticket lost reelection in 1980, Fritz summed up their administration by saying, simply: We told the truth. We obeyed the law. We kept the peace. That may not be a recipe for political victory in America, then or today, but it is testimony to gospel values.

Because of its position and privilege, Westminster can find it challenging to follow Jesus – to be a witness. We’re the largest Protestant church downtown and one of the largest

churches in the denomination. We inhabit a prominent, iconic building on Main Street Minnesota. We count among our members public figures, a US senator, leaders of business, medicine, and higher education. We have an abundance of resources.

Before I came to serve this congregation Dan Little, the wonderful, insightful transitional pastor here for two years was a good friend. One day before I began here, he gave me advice that I have remembered: “This place can be seductive. Be careful.”

That was not advice only for me, but for this historic congregation. What he meant was that a congregation like Westminster can forget that it is following Jesus, and not the way of the world. With all the trappings of success we can get confused and lose our way. The power of the world extracts and consumes and maintains the status quo and competes to win; in contrast, the power Jesus gives opens up and lets go and centers those on the margins and has love of neighbor at its core.

As Westminster re-opens its building and re-animates its on-site ministries, and the city comes back to life after two-plus years of isolation and slow-down, we will need to resist the temptation to go back to old habits for their own sake, and instead discover how God is at work in us to give us the courage to follow Jesus in new ways.

There is no reason for us to be ashamed of our Christian faith. It should not be kept secret. We can even speak of it to others. But we must take care not to weaponize it for purposes antithetical to the gospel.

Who will be a witness? Who will be a witness?

Why not this thriving downtown congregation in one of America's great cities, this church that longs to participate in God's unfolding love and justice?

Who will be a witness? Who will be a witness?

Why not us?

Thanks be to God.

Amen.