

“Illuminating the Way”
Isaiah 42:8-13; Acts 22:1-16;
Luke 24:44-53

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I would invite you to think about what the very first thing that comes to mind is when I say this word: witness. It would be very interesting to hear what everybody thought about when I said that word, because there are all kinds of ways of thinking about it. If we weren't sitting in church, but were outside looking at the courthouse and somebody said “witness,” we might think of someone who comes up to the front of the courtroom and is an official witness at a trial. That's one kind of witness; somebody who has seen something and is invited to tell what they saw. I'm not sure whether that is a negative or positive form of witness.

I think about the witness who signs a marriage certificate confirming that they witnessed this marriage. I think that's a joyful witness—a witnessing of a promise made—and the enjoyment that can be had from that kind of witness.

Of course, as we talk about witness in terms of Christian faith there may be all kinds of other images that come to mind. Jesus is inviting his disciples to be witnesses to what they have seen. And yet over the years that word “witness” has begun to connote more than just an offering of grace. Sometimes it feels a little more like the person who is witnessing is pressing some of their own perspective on you or me. I've certainly had that kind of experience. I think that it's unfortunate that the word “witness” has taken on some not-so-nice connotations at times.

So as we think about what it means for Jesus to ask his disciples to witness to who he is and what he's about, I'd like to think about what that means for us. Because one connotation is the context into which we are to bring that word, that witness. Just the idea of using the word “witness” is something that can be hard for some of us because it has taken on a connotation that isn't always positive. Plus, I'm going to pile on reasons that make it difficult. Jesus himself helps out a little bit with this. In Luke, Chapter 18, verse 20, he's talking to the rich young ruler and he says, “You have done all these things, including not bearing false witness.” One of the 10 commandments. So not only is there this sense of wanting to be a witness, but there's this negative sense of not wanting to be a false witness. This feels really apropos in our society today. How do we not be a false witness, particularly for our faith? To really pile on, I'll go to Matthew 18:6, where he says “And it would be better for you to have a mill stone around your neck and thrown into the sea than to make one of those little ones stumble.” All of a sudden there's all this pressure building up on the idea of what it means to witness.

I won't stop there because I think in today's society there's a way in which the idea of witnessing is even harder. There's a certain sense in which Christianity is on trial or is seen as a negative. I think about a story I heard recently about a young man being in a college class, a philosophy class. In the discussion he found that there were only two theists and only one Christian. In that kind of situation, the idea of being a witness

takes on a whole new weight, a struggle, when it's not something that is well-appreciated already.

Furthermore, I was listening to an interview this week about Wesley Snipes and his new book on Christian things. The thing that was interesting about it was what the interviewer said about Christianity. He said, "It's interesting how you did this because it's so hard to present Christianity in a positive light." The main perspective on Christianity today is that it's preachy, just trying to stop people from having fun, it's hypocritical, and about control. Wow! I would guess that if he had been given a little extra time, he might say, "And it causes a lot of the world's problems, and perhaps it's not even reasonable." What a context that we live in. It's one thing to be in a church context, but in our societal context, that feels pretty accurate to me. Christianity is not appreciated, and perhaps it just feels like it is something that somebody uses for control purposes. Wow!

Let me add one more piece. If it's not difficult enough, I think it's what I would call a crisis of reality. I read a little article this week about a rapper, I can't remember his name, who believes that we live on a flat earth. He's suggesting that we live on a flat earth and the article suggests that kids are coming to school now and challenging their teachers on whether we live on an earth that's round. When we have that kind of situation, I think we have a crisis of reality. What is real? Of course, there's also the fake stuff out there. But what is real and how do we live into this world in a way that we are witnesses to the grace of God in Jesus Christ?

We live in a world with all these contrasting ways of thinking about things, what I want to call contrasting narratives. There is a wall between Palestine and Egypt. You have two contrasting narratives. A wall to keep people apart and to keep some people in. We have contrasting narratives in our world today. How do we deal with those?

Let me suggest one way to begin to do that. I've given all this weight to all this struggle. In some ways, you look at that and it feels like it's almost impossible. But there is a way that we as humans work, and one of the things I'll say is that it is about our stories. N. T. Wright, in his three-volume set on the New Testament, at the very beginning is trying to set the stage for how we might understand how humans understand things and why he can look at scripture and it can be real. But he starts with something like this. He says one way of thinking about it is the importance of our stories, so let me quote him.

Closer to home, stories are used in personal and domestic discourse not merely to provide information about events that have taken place, but to embody and hence reinforce or perhaps modify a shared world view within a family, an office, a club, a college, [or even society]. Stories thus provide a vital framework for experiencing the world. They provide a means by which views of the world may be challenged.

One way to think about what we do is that we have a story. We have a story about who we are. A story about how the world works. It's our way of seeing things. It's our story. We have our memory, our experiences; they are our particular story. Now if we're wise, we realize that our stories, our experience, our ways of understanding everything, the way we've put it together are partial. They are not ultimate. But that's where we start. We start with our story and how we understand.

Just to illustrate that we've done this over and over again, that there are certain ways that we have described our lives, one of the things that has been coming into my mind for some reason recently is this idea of the Divine Right of Kings. That was the story that was told. It's the idea that the king was supposed to be the one who had all the power and everything was directed to that king. I think the Gospel lesson subverts that, but it was used in the opposite way. It was a story that was told, that was believed, that people lived out. We have a history of it. That's one of the things our nation's founders did, is to break that story and help us see that's not the story we have to live with.

So how do we witness? We tell our story. Isn't that what Paul is doing today? As we listen, Paul gets up and simply tells his story of God's grace in his life. He doesn't tell all the myriad of things that he knows about Jesus. He doesn't try to tell people how they should live. He simply tells them his story and how from that he has recognized God's grace in Jesus Christ. It's his story of grace. He shares it in a world where there is so much conflict and uncertainty and crises.

We still have our stories. I believe we each have our story of grace, our moments of grace. Sometimes it feels like there are moments of grace where God really is present and with us in our lives. Sometimes those moments of grace come through God's people as we are invited, and lifted up, and given grace. So we each have our own stories.

Part of my story is that when I was a junior in college, I went on something called Semester at Sea. Now I was a kid from Iowa. I was about as naive as they come. And here I got on this boat that took off from San Francisco and went to Hawaii, and Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and China, and The Philippines, and India, South Africa, Brazil—around the world. All these different places! I remember being on a bus in India and looking out and seeing oxen pulling a cart. Being a kid from Iowa, I had no idea that people in the world still used this mode of transportation. My world was shaken. I didn't understand what was going on. And yet, when I got back, in spite of all the consternation and conundrums that I faced, all the uncertainty with what I should believe and what the world was about, I looked back and recognized a sense of grace, a sense of God's love holding me during that time of uncertainty, that time of feeling like the world was falling apart. And yet it didn't. It was a moment of grace. That's part of my story. Each of us has a story, has moments of grace, times when we're lifted up, times when God enters in.

The other thing I would say is that oftentimes when we tell our stories of grace we have to begin somewhere, and in a world today with so much noise, so many words, it's interesting that we can go back to somebody like St. Francis, who says, "Preach the gospel always, and when necessary use words." Because our stories are heard when our lives matter to others. And we all have a story. The interesting thing is that we get so caught up in being that we don't tell our stories. I know I've heard several times where people have gone on mission trips or have been missionaries and have done wonderful work helping a community out. Finally, the people will come and say, "You have been doing great work here. Why? Why are you here?" Sometimes we need to use the words. We need to tell our story.

We start with our story because it is intersected by God's story. Our story is intersected by the grace of God and it's where we can start, but there's a bigger story, a story of God at work, the story of God's grace. And as we recognize our own moments of grace, it becomes not only my story, it becomes part of His story, the story of God at work in the midst among us, the story of God's grace. We are invited to share that story in a world that is in so much need of the grace of God. I need that story over and over again. I imagine we all need that story. I need to be invited into it and to recognize that it's not just my story. It's our story, because we are invited to be children of God and to share God's story. Amen.