

WITNESSING KEPT: Reflections on Acts 1:3-14
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My Friends, do you remember April 16th where you were and what you were celebrating? Now fast forward to last Thursday, May 25th. Easter Sunday to Ascension Thursday -- 40 days – after his resurrection *he appeared to them over a period of 40 days*. Luke alone tells us that detail. Luke's Book of Acts picks up where his Gospel leaves off. Reflections upon what Jesus told us during that time, are the heart of today's message. Acts: 1 – the Ascension.

Please, my friends understand that the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts is one story, written by the same author, composed at the same time in the same place, and intended for the same audience. Scholars like to focus on the connection that both Books are addressed to the same Theophilus, and use the same language, same writing style, and present the same theological themes. But, that is not what is important; the two Books belong together because they counterbalance each other perfectly.

In his Gospel, Luke tells us that Jesus gave his life for us: in Acts Luke tells us that Jesus gives us his power. In his Gospel, Luke shows us how Jesus sowed the seeds of faith: in Acts, Luke shows us how we grow those seeds. In his Gospel, Luke shows us Jesus as crucified and then resurrected: in Acts, Luke shows us Jesus ascended and is exalted. In his Gospel, Luke shows God's will lived by the perfect person Jesus: in Acts, Luke shows God's will lived by flawed persons like you and I.

Today, we heard Jesus say, "*You will be my witnesses.*" For those who seek to be Jesus's followers, this is not an invitation: this is an imperative. Jesus is not just talking to the disciples: he's talking to each one of us. *BE MY WITNESS.*

But, Jesus, we ask, how to we do that without you? Without you here: physically and tangibly and bodily present to lead us? How are we to attest, to affirm, to testify, and to proclaim you dear Lord? How do we 'witness?' you, all alone and on our own?

In Acts 1, Jesus responds with five life-long pursuits in answer to His assignment to Witness. And witnessing is THE major assignment.

- 1) KEEP LEARNING ABOUT THE ASSIGNMENT: "*he spoke about the kingdom of God.*"

For forty days, Jesus performs miracles and teaches. 40 days is the perfect period of instruction sanctioned by the Father (Ex 24:12-18; 34:28; Kings 19:8, and Luke 4:1-13).

Jesus instructs his followers about the Kingdom of God. He tells them not to leave Jerusalem, to wait there for the Father's promise to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. He tells them to trust that they will be empowered to advance God's mission.

Jesus schools us using His teachings and Scripture to keep looking and to keep listening and to keep learning and to keep aligning our belief with God's will.

My friends, it is useless to try and proclaim what we have not studied and what we have not learned. Witness is based on knowledge gleaned through sermons reflections, Bible study, group discussions, homework done, context researched, shared interpretations, and especially, the comfort and challenge of holy conversation with one another. Witnessing for Jesus does not happen in an intellectual vacuum. Witnessing requires the continual revisiting the written Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures.

2) KEEP KNOWING WHAT THE ASSIGNMENT IS: *"You will be my witnesses."*

Verses 6-8 of this morning's reading encompass Jesus's last words – he has not spoken to all of us since. These phrases are His final will and testament.

It all begins when the disciples ask a well-placed question *"Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?"* When the Holy Spirit comes, is that it? Is the Kingdom then restored? Is this that redemptive moment? Is that the fulfillment of the Scriptures? Is that the end to foreign domination? Is this the last of all our problems and difficulties?

"It's not for you to know . . . "

Let God be God. Jesus tells us that there are things we are not meant to know. There are things we are not meant to understand. Maybe sometime, maybe never.

Receiving the Holy Spirit signals a season for restoration of God's rule. Receiving the Holy Spirit is not a onetime event. It commences a new vocation on our part. According to Luke, God's reign will not come as some heaven induced catastrophic apocalypse. God's reign will come after we toil long and hard to make it a reality. And then, finally, our mission on earth will be capped off by the return of Jesus to receive and complete the work He began.

"You will be my witnesses" is the key verse in all of Acts. 2x

Being a witness for Jesus is very simple. You don't need to memorize some complex creed. You don't have to master arcane rituals. You don't have to wear special costumes. You don't even have to say a secret password or give a secret handshake. Witnessing for

Jesus is simple, but it requires enormous commitment. There are three parts to being a witness for Jesus:

- A) Proclaim the good news: of which there are 5 simple messages others want and need to hear, which our Lord asks us to deliver.
 - 1) Jesus is God/ come to earth in human form out of love for us.
 - 2) Jesus died/and by that sacrifice opened up eternal life.
 - 3) Jesus was resurrected/conquering sin and evil]5x/
 - 4) Jesus is now exalted/ in heaven dealing out forgiveness, care, and compassion.
 - 5) Jesus calls us /to believe in him and receive forgiveness for our failings

- B) Practice what we proclaim. We have to walk the talk we voice. We have to be open to growing in the experience of what we proclaim. We have to be careful to listen because God is ALWAYS speaking to us. We have to strive to act as Jesus acted, remembering as Francis of Assisi cautioned, *“the deeds you do, may be the only sermon some person will hear today.”*

- C) Proclaim with Passion. Nurture that passion and dare to pray for the strength to have greater passion. Devotion, desire, drive.
PROCLAIM, PRACTICE, PASSION.

3) KEEP KNOWING WHERE THE MISSION IS DESTINED.

This morning Jesus specifies three destinations– Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. The rest of Acts chronicles that exact progression: chapters 1-7 deal with Jerusalem; chapters 8-12 deal with Judea and Samaria; and chapters 12-28 deal with the world beyond.

This part of this Jesus’s message was to His disciples incredibly shocking. Dangerous Jerusalem? – where they just crucified you and where they are hunting us down even now. Thankless Judea and Renegade Samaria? -- Judeans who rejected us not long ago (been there, done that) and the Samaritans, those half-breed traitors to the Jewish cause; and to the barbaric ends of the earth? -- Jesus you can’t be talking about including those impure Gentiles and oppressive Romans, too? Where to witness? Far and near. Everywhere.

Know God. Grow in God. Honor God. Serve God. Live in God. Love God. Praise God. But Witness Jesus. Everywhere.

Including our own Jerusalem's – those who scare us, alarms us fill us with dread or who may threaten our social standing, career path, or renowned influence. Go witness to them. Our own Judeas -- those who reject us, ostracize us, exclude us, renounce us, rebuff us? Go witness to them. Our own Samarias – those who have betrayed us, broken faith with us, deserted us, doubled crossed us, deceived us, let us down? Go witness to them. The Ends of our own Earth -- the alien, the invader, the outsider, the enemy, the unforgiveable, the o one who justifies hatred? Go witness to them. Across the seas and across the street, witness. Everywhere. Now.

- 4) KEEP TRUSTING THAT THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL KEEP COMING UPON YOU. *You will receive the power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you ...*

And after inviting us to shoulder the tasks of bringing the Rule of God, Jesus ascends. Jesus departs. Jesus leaves, yet somehow still remains. *It is not for you to know . . .*

The Ascension is an incredible scene – unlike others who were resuscitated like Lazarus, Jesus never dies. Unlike the moment of resurrection itself, there are now multiple witnesses instead of none. Unlike the disparagement of the past, Jesus is exalted. A cloud surrounds him – the cloud Moses witnessed on Mount Sinai, the cloud the Hebrews followed out of Egypt, the cloud present over the Tabernacle, the cloud Ezekiel saw over the eastern gate, and the cloud surrounding Jesus on the Mount of the Transfiguration, comes again, a holy cloud as a sign of the Father's presence and pleasure. Jesus, why leave us?

Jesus draws back as a condition to allow us to share more fully in the God's purpose. Jesus draws back as a condition to allow the in breaking of the Holy Spirit into our lives. Jesus draws back as a condition to allow us to more creatively know, love, and serve God. Those things wouldn't happen in the same way if Jesus didn't draw back. Jesus draws back to give us more room to do God's good will.

Then, two men appear in white robes and encourage the disciples to cease gazing upward and get themselves back to Jerusalem. Who were these two? The two impartial witness required by the Law? The same two who appeared to the women at the empty tomb? Two angels on assignment? Moses and Elijah back from their Transfiguration appearances? We don't know. Whoever they were they were holy. Because what we do know is that

all of the disciples, women included, joyously rush back to Jerusalem to THE upper room, where they . . .

5) KEEP PRAYING ABOUT THE ASSIGNMENT

The disciples pray. In fact, prayer precedes every major action taken in Acts. They pray not out of desperation, but out of hope, not out of idleness but out of belief. Please reflect on how they pray:

- a) They are Persistent – *They all joined together constantly in prayer.*

They are devoted to prayer. In the last line of Luke’s gospel we know they also go to the Temple to pray. They grasp the reality of Luke 11: 9-10 – [my translation] – keep asking and you will be given; keep seeking and you will find; keep knocking and the door will be opened.

- b) They Pray in Unity – *They all joined together.*

For them prayer is a community project, and hallmarked by solidarity. Not one of them goes off to have some sort of separate, exclusive tete-a-tete with Jesus. These disciples are real people – just like us – they have real names and real families and real friends just like we do. They love and hate, they succeed and fail, and they obey and sin. Yet, they are all of one mind. They sense that by praying together, the doors to forgiveness, restitution, healing, justice, and mutual affirmation – all actions that require community – will be opened. That by praying together faith, hope and love will be made manifest in their challenge, care, and compassion for one another unlike ever before in history.

- c) They Recognize their Dependence – throughout history the earliest prayer as always been recognized as simply “HELP”.

Those disciples realize that they cannot do it alone. They know they need the promised Holy Spirit to come upon them. To witness, the power and comfort, the presence and reinvigoration, and the energy and intensity of God will be greatly needed. They pray because by themselves they recognize can do little for Jesus. They pray because they realize with the Holy Spirit they can do anything for Jesus.

And my sisters and brothers so can we:

For the Holy Spirit is ever present – a voice that whispers as St. Francis said, start by doing what is necessary, then do what is possible, and suddenly you will do the impossible.

When we learn what God intends us to know,
When we realize what God's mission entails,
When we grasp where God's call will take us,
When we act in unity to discern God's purpose in all of this,
And When we trust the Holy Spirit to guide us through it all

Then we can proclaim persuasively,
Then we can teach boldly,
Then we can live lives of practice, patience, and passion,
and then, anywhere and everywhere – Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the very ends
of the Earth, we can tell the Good News!

Then, we can even be blessed to perform the greatest miracle of all – 2x
simply opening someone's closed heart to the benevolence of God's love
in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

