

the story of GOD

a narrative lectionary
bible study

april 3, 2016



Can I Get A Witness?

Read Acts 1:1-14

Just as Jesus was leaving, he tells his disciples that they will be his witnesses. What does it mean to be a witness? What does it mean for us, those who, unlike the disciples, never knew Jesus personally?

acts 1:8

"...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 end of the earth."

IN-DEPTH: A deeper look at the story

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

Acts starts where Luke left off. The writer acknowledges this is the second part of the story. In fact, those opening verses tell us that in verse one that Jesus began a ministry that continued up to this day, the day he would be taken up into heaven. The word in the Common English version, "beginning," states that Jesus started something. Notice it doesn't say that anything about ending anything. These opening words give us a clue that what Jesus started is going to be handed off to his followers.

Another way of looking at it is that the disciples were looking at endings. They were thinking of "end times," of how things would wrap up. Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, but they were thinking about the restoration of Jewish rule. That's why they ask Jesus that question: "Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?" They were thinking that Jesus was going to end things. But Jesus started something, something they would have to finish.

In verse 7 Jesus steers the disciples away from their question. Instead of focusing on the future, he tells them to focus on what is going on now. Jesus has prepared the disciples to working the present, demonstrating the kingdom of God and transforming the world around them. Jesus didn't ignore the future; verse 11 signifies that Jesus will return. But Jesus wanted to get his followers to focus on the present, the future - while important- was secondary.

It's also important to note that Jesus didn't condemn the disciples for focusing on the future. It was important to them and to

Jesus. But Jesus was restoring Israel in another way, one that the disciples could not see at this time.

Jesus then gives the followers an strategy in telling the good news. In verse 8 Jesus says the following:

"Rather, 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 end of the earth."

Pastor Gina Stewart explains Acts 1:8 in modern words:

"The apostles would be empowered by the Holy Spirit, as the sending force behind the missionary enterprise, to go forth as witnesses in their own community (Jerusalem), their region (all of Judea), the region that was socially and ethnically different from their own (Samaria), and the world beyond their knowledge, (the Roman territories and the Mediterranean world). The Spirit is the Spirit of promise poured out on God's people in order to enable them to perform mission work in the world. God's vision for the world would be accomplished through human beings empowered by the Spirit, sent into the world as witnesses-heralds of God's grace. Since these witnesses had touched, experienced, and felt God's grace, they could testify to it."

The rest of the book of Acts is basically an response to what Jesus said in verse 8. Empowered by the Spirit, the disciples will spread the news of Jesus in Jerusalem, to Jerusalem, to Samaria and the known Roman Empire.

So, Jesus had given the disciples their orders; focus on being a witness for Christ. What does it mean to be a witness?

WHAT'S A WITNESS?

In most versions of the Bible, Jesus calls the disciples "witnesses" in Acts 1:8. What does it mean to be a witness?

It's important to understand what is the greek word for witness, *martus*. Like a lot of Greek words, this one sounds like one used in English: *martyr*. The meaning of martyr is someone that dies for a certain belief. This is the word used when we talk about people who died for their faith.

But the meaning of the word *martus* is somewhat different. The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon says that *martus* means:

...to be a witness, to bear witness, i.e. to affirm that one has seen or heard or experienced something, or that he knows it because taught by divine revelation or inspiration.

This is what Jesus means in verse 8. The disciples bore witness to the life of Jesus and they are to go to ends of the earth to share the good news of Jesus. Jesus isn't saying that Jesus' followers needed to die, but to bear witness Christ. That said, a number of people hearing Christ's parting words would be killed because of their belief. It was the actions of those who died for defending the faith that changed the meaning of the word *martus*. Telling the good news isn't always dangerous, but sometimes it can be. Jesus isn't calling the

disciples to give up their lives, but to live their lives in light of Jesus; to be a witness.

What about us? We haven't seen Jesus like the first disciples, but we have heard the story and taken it to be part of our own story. We live out our lives as a living witness to Jesus. While we now wait for Christ's second coming, we continue to focus on the task given, to be a witness in our local communities, in our nation and around the world.

But if we have a poor witness that can have an impact on how people view Jesus and the church. One example of leaving a poor witness can be found in social media. Many of us can be very outspoken in social media, sharing what politicians they like and which ones they loathe. And I'm not joking about the loathing here. People make some very mean-spirited comments on Twitter and Facebook about candidates from an opposing political party. All of us, have opinions on political issues. But, can a post where a Christian attacks people based on their race or political preference, show a poor witness? When we are on Facebook or Twitter, how can we be witnesses to the ends of the earth?

THE WAITING IS THE HARDEST PART

Before Jesus ascends, before he tells his disciples what they will be doing after he leaves, he tells them to do something else: wait. He told them to stay in Jerusalem until what God had promised comes. We will know that as the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, but they didn't know that. What they knew was that a few days before, the religious leaders in Jerusalem had arrested him and the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate had ordered Jesus to be executed. Long story short, it might not have been the best time for them to stay in the big city.

So as Jesus ascended, they stood there...waiting I guess. But then two men dressed in white tells them to not just stand there. While they were called to wait in Jerusalem, they were not called to just sit on their hands. Read verses 12-14 of chapter one and find out that they start to get busy:

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which is near Jerusalem—a sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they entered the city, they went to the upstairs room where they were staying. Peter, John, James, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James, Alphaeus' son; Simon the zealot; and Judas, James' son— 14 all were united in their devotion to prayer, along with some women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

The disciples prepared for what was coming, even though they didn't know what it was. For modern disciples, we will learn that there are times when we have to wait for things. God calls us to not just sit and do nothing, but to be busy preparing for what God has in store for us. Waiting is a hard thing in a culture that has instant everything, but it seems that waiting can be a holy discipline that will help us in our own discipleship with God.

EXPLORE THIS

Ascension Day

The event of Jesus ascending to heaven is actually a special day in the church year. Ascension Day or Feast of the Ascension, takes place 40 days after Easter. In 2016, Ascension is commemorated on May 5 in the Western Church (Protestant and Catholic) and June 9 in the Eastern Church (Orthodox).

Lutheran Pastor Tom Rauk describes Ascension this way:

"The word Ascension means, "to go up, to rise above, to climb up." And so, a mountain climber "ascends a mountain." A soldier "ascends" to a higher rank. A worker "ascends" in the company to a position of more authority, more pay, a higher career position. Prince Charles is next in line to "ascend" to the throne as king of England. And with the ascension, there is the implication that the one ascending now has new insight, new authority, new responsibility.

In one of his most famous speeches, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I've been to the mountain top." I can see something more clearly now than I could before. I have ascended and have received spiritual insights that I didn't see before...The Ascension story is not about Jesus leaving. It's about Jesus lifting the sight of his followers up to the possibilities of what their ministry would mean in the future."

Read Tom Rauk's full sermon: <http://wooddalelutheran.com/2011/06/05/the-meaning-of-the-ascension/>

Learn more about Ascension Day: <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/ascension-day/>

WRAP-UP: Time to Review

IN MEDIA

Watch Pastor John Steven's weekly entry in Dollar Store Sermons. He spends time explaining what a witness is. While this is geared to children and children's sermons, there are nuggets there for adults as well. View the video by going to: <https://youtu.be/ATms5g1GNRo>.

Next, watch video by Bible Scholar Nikki Hardeman on the same Acts text. Her focus is on the fact that the disciples were told to wait in Jerusalem. Watch her video by going to: <http://faithement.com/sessions/2012/5/15/waiting.html>.

Finally, consider listen to a 2008 sermon by theologian Walter Brueggeman on the text. He notes that "Being a witness for Jesus is dangerous." You can listen by going to http://www.calvin.edu/worship/podcast/cep/archive/wbrueggemann_acts1.mp3.

While you listen to any of these, ask yourself what it means to you to be a witness and what waiting has to do with it.

DIG DEEP

As we said earlier, the greek word for witness is the words that we also get the English word martyr. While it has been used to bear witness in many different faiths it has also been misused. For example, many Islamist terrorists use the language of martyrdom to excuse their murderous actions, a far cry from how martyrdom is practiced in Islam.

In a 2013 column in the Economist, the writer Erasmus thinks that we in the west who don't face threats on a daily basis, might want to widen the meaning of martyr to mean those who "who knowingly face specific risks to save others." His example are the fire-fighters who perished on 9/11 lead by their chaplain Mychal Judge who also died during the attacks. You can read the full column by going to: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2013/10/meaning-martyrdom>.

Do you think this expanded meaning is helpful?

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What does it mean to share the good news of Jesus with others? Does it make you feel excited or scared?
2. What role should waiting have in our faith life? What's good about waiting? What's not so good? Why would Jesus tell the disciples to wait?
3. How can we be a witness to Christ today when we haven't seen Jesus like the disciples? Can we be a witness even though we haven't lived with Jesus?
4. Was Jesus a witness? How? What was he a witness to?
5. Can you name some modern martyrs? What did they do to bear witness to Christ?

ONCE UPON A TIME: Our Story in God's Story

For some reason, it took me a while to get to learn how to ride a bike without the training wheels. The first bike that I can remember was a green JC Penny bike with training wheels. My friend Quentin, who was younger than I was, had started riding without his training wheels and my mother thought it was about time for me to do the same.

So, she took off the wheels. I think she might have given me a push or something and I can remember pedaling and then falling down. Now, most mothers might have considered picking me up and starting over again. Not my mother. She went and sat down on the front porch and told me to try again. So I did, wondering what kind of mother would do this. I started pedaling and fell again. She didn't move. I tried again. Fell again. And again. And again. Mom just sat there and said try again.

After a while I started to pedal and pedal and pedal and I didn't fall down. I was ecstatic. I had finally learned to ride a bike without those training wheels.

At the time, I thought Mom was just being mean, but she was trying to help me to do this on my own and not expect that she was going to do it for me.

My experience learning to ride a bike is related to what we read in today's text from Acts. Today in the church calendar, is the Day of Ascension, the day Jesus concludes his earthly ministry and returns to heaven. He tells his disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for God's promise, to wait for the Holy Spirit.

The disciples, in a classic example of not listening, ask him if he is going to restore the kingdom of Israel. Jesus tells them not to worry about such things, but to know that they will be empowered by the Holy Spirit

and will be his witnesses in Jerusalem until the ends of the earth.

For some reason, this scene is somewhat comical. Jesus is getting them ready for their own ministry, and they are wondering what he is going to do with the current political situation. It reminds me of a scene from the "Rocky and Bullwinkle Show," where Bullwinkle tells Rocky that he's going to pull a rabbit out of hat. If you remember, he doesn't pull out a rabbit, but a lion. In some way, the disciples wanted Jesus to do things for them. They didn't get what was going on. Jesus' ministry was done, but the ministry wasn't done. It would carry on with the disciples, but they didn't see that. They were more interested in Jesus pulling a rabbit out of his hat, help them with their issues.

The thing is, the disciples aren't the only ones missing the boat. Sometimes God is speaking to us, right here and now and we fail to listen to what God has to say. We look at our shrinking churches, along with their shrinking budgets and wonder, what is God going to do about this.

"And you will be my witnesses." Jesus is telling his disciples and he is telling us today, that we are to tell the story, the story of salvation to the ends of the earth. Tell the story of a God of love, who came to earth to be one with us. Share that message, and share it again and again.

God wants us to connect with the world and tell the story. To do that, we have to be willing to let the Spirit lead us, to have an inquisitive mind to see what God is up to in the wider world, to be empowered by the Spirit to tell God's Story.

Where are we? Are we still looking up wondering where Jesus is going or are we seeing where God is at work in the world?

So, don't look up like the disciples, as Jesus disappears. Look around you and see where God is acting in the world. Amen.

-Dennis Sanders

Photo: A picture of Dennis Sanders with his bike in Flint Michigan circa 1976.

