



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

May 28, 2017

Witnesses
Rev. Jason Freyer

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You might have a hard time believing this from the way I dress or present myself in public, but my father and I are actually really big nerds. When we get excited about something, we have a really hard time keeping it in. A few years ago at a Memorial Day barbecue, Dad started telling us all about something he had been to a few nights earlier called Pyrofest. I quietly started wondering what the cost of bail might be if my father would be accused of arson, but it turned out that Pyrofest was actually a very large festival of fireworks. Dad started telling us about how at the camp ground throughout the day, there were food trucks and stands as far as the eye could see, as well as rides and carnival games. He told us how there were local bands that would play on stage throughout the afternoon and evening. And then the fireworks shows themselves would begin. It turned out that Pyrofest is actually like a rock concert for fireworks. The evening begins with an opening “band,” and as it wears on, the shows get more and more complex, before we arrive at some major player in the world of fireworks as the closing act. The whole way through his story, Dad kept saying “You have to see this! You have to see this!”

So the next year it surprised no one that Dad bought tickets for all of us, and we did in fact see what Pyrofest was all about. And you know what? We DID need to see this! Dad wasn't able to articulate how awesome a time Pyrofest really is, without us getting to see it for ourselves. And now I find myself telling everyone I know about Pyrofest. You really have to see this.

Today, we gather together to celebrate the accession of Jesus. We read the story in Acts about how Jesus gathered his disciples together, and told them what was to come. I love that the disciples rarely get it. It gives me a certain level

of comfort. As the resurrected Jesus is standing in front of them, the disciples ask if this is the time that Jesus is going to restore the kingdom to Israel. These are the same disciples who have seen Jesus die on a cross. They are the same disciples that saw the risen Christ join them for a fish breakfast. These same disciples were able to touch his hands and the hole in his side. And now, standing here on a mountain about to witness something spectacular, they ask Jesus about a local political issue.

For his part, Jesus is really gentle with the disciples. He understands and informs them that they don't yet have the tools to understand what's going on. They'll get that when the Holy Spirit comes upon them at Pentecost. But when that happens, Jesus tells them, these disciples are going to be his witnesses in the city of Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and in fact to the entire world. It's going to start where they are, but their witnessing is going to go far and wide.

It turns out that Jesus has a habit of doing this, of showing his disciples something amazing, and then giving them room to digest it. Jesus takes three disciples up on a mountain to witness the glory of the transfiguration, and then has a candid conversation with them on the way back down about what they had just seen. After his triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem, Jesus goes into the temple to cause a scene by flipping over tables and driving out money changers. After that, he gathers his disciples around a fig tree to use a metaphor for what they had just witnessed. And now we have the ascension. It's almost like through his whole ministry, Jesus keeps whispering to his disciples again and again "You have to see this!"

Have you ever been in this situation, where you are serving on a commission here at the church, and during your meeting someone shows up just a wee bit late, walking in right during the opening prayer? And have you ever witnessed the person offering the prayer saying something like “Lord, we thank you for our wrist watches, for the ability to tell time, to be early and punctual...” It’s like the person is praying, but they’re actually talking to someone else in the room more than they’re talking to the Lord. Jesus is doing just that when he’s praying in our gospel lesson in John. He’s praying, but he’s also letting the disciples know that they’re about to witness a new kind of glory. We’re going to have a taste of eternal life.

When it comes to God’s eternal life, we have a tendency to over complicate things, to over think what’s going on. Jesus brings it right down to its most basic elements for us. “This is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Eternal life is all about relationships, specifically our relationship with the God of the universe.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t say “that they may know about God,” as if faith was some sort of intellectual exercise. For Jesus, this is about an honest to goodness relationship. And in this prayer, Jesus tells us that the love from this relationship with God won’t just be a person to person kind of love, but that our love is best understood in a community of disciples. God’s love poured in to us almost can’t help but be poured out into our neighbors around us.

To all of this glory, Christ reminds us that we are going to be witnesses. A good witness either sees something, or hears something, and then talks about what they’ve seen or heard.

And so we have to ask ourselves this morning, are we being good witnesses?

What have you heard? This is why it is so incredibly critical that we read the Bible, to know our place in God's story. Working with teenagers, there is a constant temptation to treat reading the Bible like another homework assignment, as if when we get to heaven Peter's going to have a theological entrance exam. But that's really not what it's about. The Bible is all about eternal life as Jesus says it; it's about knowing God and knowing Christ. Reading the Bible isn't for hearing about the story, it's for finding our place within the story. So what story are you hearing?

And also, what have you seen? Again, nothing frustrates me more than when folks try to boil down our faith to a series of ideas or thoughts. That's not the kind of God I've come to see in the scriptures. The God of the Bible seems like someone who has muddy shoes, who is acting and working in the world around us. We've noted before that this active God is every bit as present here in the church as he is in the Starbucks down the street. When our eyes are open, there is no place where we are unable to witness God's glory.

But a word of caution is required here. Jesus did in fact invite the disciples to witness the glory of the transfiguration. Jesus invited his disciples to witness the victory of his ascension. But Jesus also invited the disciples to witness his arrest and trial. He invited them to witness the crowd that had been on his side turn around and demand his crucifixion, and then the disciples were invited to witness that too. There are lots of beautiful things God is up to in the world that he invites us to witness, but sometimes he invites us to witness God's glory in the heartbreak, the tragic, and the hopeless.

This is why we need witnesses to God's glory every day. At least for me, there are times that the difficult seasons in life roll in like a fog, almost acting like a blindfold over my eyes to prevent me from seeing what God's up to in my life. It's why I need you, my brothers and sisters, to be witnesses to God's goodness. I need you to tell me, so that I can hear it for myself.

I think there's some wisdom in how Jesus tells the disciples they're going to be witnesses. He tells them that they will in fact be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, and in the region of Judea and Samaria, but he tells them to start with where they are. Witness in the city you're in right now. When Christians talk of witnessing, sometimes they start at the global level, looking to build a Christian media platform or have a seminar or a teaching conference or something. But I wonder this morning, what does it look like to witness to the goodness of Christ in our own neighborhoods?

What does it look like this weekend to gather around the grill and hear the stories of brave men and women who have served this country? Listening to them, hearing what they've been through, discussing what they've experienced, that can be a kind of witnessing. When you witness the joy of your neighbors, celebrate the goodness of their lives, that's a kind of witnessing. When you see someone who is struggling with loneliness, when you see someone who is in the throes of despair and you choose to join them there, that's a kind of witnessing. You and I can be witnesses to the glory of God in our own neighborhoods, even this very weekend.

Jesus reminded us that God's glory is in fact relational, that God continues to act around us each and every day. It means that we can be witnesses to God's glory even here and now, in the city where we reside. What have you heard?

What have you seen? What will you tell your neighbors about?



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