

God's Invitation to Bless: Waiting and Witnessing
Acts 1:1-8; Psalm 27:1-5, 13-14
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Psalm 27:1-5, 13-14

¹ The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

² When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.

³ Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

⁴ One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.

⁵ For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

¹³ I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.

¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

Acts 1:1-8 (NRSV)

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He 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.”

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Sometimes the ends of the earth are as close as your hometown.

I was talking with my dad the other day, and we started talking about what he and his lady friend have been up to socially. Don't all calls with parents end up in this way? In between movies and dinner parties and concerts—their social life is easily busier than mine—he mentioned that he had invited a recent widower to join them at a restaurant.

I thought back to Easter, and how Dad and Esther had invited another widower to go out with them after church. Then I kept thinking of other times when they had done that.

I said, “Dad, do you do this on purpose? It's a great ministry for you, reaching out to widowers.”

He said, “well I can see why you would use that word—ministry—but I've never thought about it that way. But I guess so, yes.”

I said “ministry,” but this week while I’ve been exploring our passage from the book of Acts, I’ve come to realize that “witness” is probably an even better word for what he’s been doing than “ministry.” Witnessing is part and parcel of our faith, according to the book of Acts.

The book of Acts is the sequel to the book of Luke. Same author wrote them both. You might call Luke “Avengers: Infinity War” and Acts, “Avengers: Endgame.” Less violence, less snarky repartee, less finger snapping, but yes, just as epic!

Throughout Luke Jesus is trying to get his followers to understand what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like—that time and place when everything is the way God wants it to be. He tells parables and he lives his life in a way that demonstrates that Jesus’ kingdom is not a military power. He comes in on Palm Sunday on a colt, not a stallion. He dies a humiliating death on the cross.

But it’s not even a week after his resurrection and the disciples are together and the first thing they ask is, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Is this the time you’re finally going to establish Israel’s military might?

As I’ve told you before, they don’t call them the duh-sciples for nothing.

To set them straight, Jesus tells them that they’ll be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Not witnessing to his military power, but witnessing to his ministry of unconditional love and grace for all the people of the world.

Witnessing is one of the commands that Jesus gives them in this passage. The other one is to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come. Waiting and witnessing; witnessing and waiting. Those are the two commands of this passage.

We’ll start with witnessing—you know, what my dad did—not in Jerusalem or Samaria, but in Beavercreek, OH. Not necessarily the end of the earth, but I think you can see it from there.

Millennia after Jesus' charged his disciples in the book of Acts, Dad is witnessing by showing compassion to widowers, helping them to experience more of the abundant life that Jesus wants them to have. Showing compassion is one way we witness to others—caring for them when they are in need or despairing. Our compassionate witness leads us to watch out for our neighbor going through a divorce, or our mother when she is struggling with cancer.

But it's only one. There are three basic ways we witness to others. Acts of Compassion, yes. Another one is to work for social justice. Looking to address the systems that marginalize or demean people with less power in the world. Often advocating for fairer governmental policies or business practices.

The third way we witness is by actually opening our mouth and saying something about God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit. That's evangelism—when we articulate how we have experienced the divine and tell others how God has changed our lives. It's using words to tell our story of faith, whether or not anyone else ever comes to believe.

All three of these ways of witnessing—acts of compassion, social justice, and evangelism—all three are ways that we answer God's invitation to bless others.

Whether we are sitting by our second mom's bedside while the ravages of Alzheimer's slowly make her fade away, or writing our congressperson to ask for more funding for dementia patients, or singing hymns of God's goodness to her as her days wind down, it's a blessing that we witness in these ways. Here's another example of the various kinds of witness that we do: witnessing to God's desire to end homelessness. Witnessing by social justice might mean advocating with the Lake County Board for more affordable housing units. Witnessing by acts of compassion might be going to serve at PADS—Lake County's only homeless shelter—by baking dinner for them when some of us go to serve dinner to them once or twice a month. Witnessing by evangelism around this issue? Well that's a little harder to come by.

After all, when we go to PADS to volunteer and serve dinner, I notice that the clients are much more likely to witness with words to us than we are to them.

“Thank you so much for coming. It’s a real blessing from God that you are here.”

“Dear Lord, thank you for giving us what we need to get through another day. Help us to be patient and kind with each other.”

“This chocolate pudding is a gift from God!”

The clients are much more likely to evangelize us than we are to articulate our faith to them.

Of course, that shouldn’t surprise us. Presbyterians have never been the best at opening our mouths and actually saying something about God, or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. I often wish that St. Francis had never said, “Preach the gospel at all times, and, if necessary, use words.” That’s the last advice we need to hear!

Our denomination has developed markers for congregational vitality—seven of them. Things like lifelong Christian formation, inspiring worship, and caring relationships. Of the seven, the one that comes in dead last is “intentional, authentic evangelism.” And I don’t think it would have been any higher if it were “haphazard, inauthentic evangelism.” We Presbyterians would often rather talk about any number of other taboo subjects than to articulate some aspect of our faith to others.

One church I heard about recently surveyed the congregation and discovered that about half the congregation marked that entering into relationships with people of other faith was of the utmost importance to them. Of those people, literally ZERO said that they had even a minimal interest in sharing their faith.

Remember, I said that there are two commandments in this passage: Witnessing and waiting. Waiting and witnessing.

We’re not very good at witnessing part, if we’re thinking about evangelism.

What about the waiting part? Are we any better at that? The part where Jesus says “Wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes on you.”

In general we’re way better at waiting than we are at witnessing. We are way better at pausing and thinking than we are at opening our mouths. In this way we’re just like Jesus’ disciples: one of my mentors said that that command is the only one that the disciples were totally ready to follow:

Don’t do anything! Wait! Until the Spirit comes!

Like the disciples, we’re good at the waiting.

But I’m not so sure that we’re so good at waiting *for the Holy Spirit* to come. We’re not as good at asking the Holy Spirit to empower us to do what we’re not very confident about. We’re not as good at asking the Holy Spirit to move us to do what we don’t feel like doing.

But what would happen if we turned and asked the Holy Spirit to strengthen us to witness by evangelism?

I think things could be totally different.

That’s the idea I got, anyway, at the women’s Bible study on Wednesday this past week. We were talking about this passage and I asked them if any of them had ever felt like the Holy Spirit had empowered them to witness.

A hand quickly shot up, and a story quickly tumbled out. A woman I’ll call “Lisa” has in-law’s who are not Christian, and it hasn’t always been easy in their relationship because of their different religious commitments.

They were at dinner over Christmas, and Lisa’s mother-in-law commented that she wished that it was Christmas all year-round, because of how kind everyone seems to be over the holidays.

Somehow that was the opening the Spirit brought Lisa, and somehow she dived in. She talked about her faith and her prayers. She told them what Jesus

meant to her. She didn't try to get the theology just right or try to shove any of this down their throat. She just told her story.

Before she knew it an hour had gone by! She apologized and said, "I'm so sorry if this has offended you or if I was too pushy."

They told her "no," that they were glad to hear it.

Did they convert to be Christians? It doesn't seem like it. Did they drop to their knees and pray? Not that she knows of.

Lisa told me she just hopes that the seeds that she planted would grow, bit by bit.

I was thinking about how anxious I might be if I jumped in and had a conversation like this, so I asked Lisa if she was nervous during all that time. She said, simply, "no."

I guess that's what happens when you combine those two commandments: wait for the Spirit, and witness.

Thanks be to God. Amen.