

“Witnesses”

A sermon by the Rev. Frances Savill
Sunday April 18, 2021

Luke 24:36-49

God has a large mission that God is working out in our midst. But God doesn't write the message of Jesus' birth across the skies so that all the world can see. God doesn't send letters or e-mails or even lightening bolts across the sky with messages, warnings, words of wisdom, or eternal truths. No Tweets or texts.

God sent people – prophets, leaders like Moses, and finally he sent his Son, Jesus.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples, after the resurrection, he said to them, “Peace be with you” and he said “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?”

Then he told them that the “Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. *You are witnesses of these things.*”

Notice a couple of things about the commissioning that happens here at the end of Luke's gospel:

First, some disciples still had doubts. Doubts do not preclude faith.

Doubts are not bad, they don't exclude you from serving God.

Jesus doesn't segregate those who are fully convinced and only commission them.

Jesus calls them all witnesses, and the picture we get in Acts is that as the disciples go out in Jesus' name their faith grows.

That is the experience of many disciples still today. Disciples go still asking questions, still with doubts, and yet in the going forward they grow and faith continues.

Next, the disciples are sent as witnesses. They aren't sent as experts with all the answers. They are sent with what they have seen and heard and lived along side of Jesus. They are sent as people who will form other people to live as Jesus lived, to be part of his mission in the world. They were to be witnesses. They were to rub elbows with friends and family, the people they worked with, the people they met, in that particular time and place, and they were to bring the life and presence of Jesus to them.

The pattern continues to today. Your story, the story of your encounters with God, how God has changed you, forgiven you, how you live your faith, is your witness.

How many of you know the song "It is well with my soul?" written by Horatio Spafford? It's quite a beautiful hymn.

The words are:

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

*Refrain: It is well, (it is well), With my soul, (with my soul)
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.*

But if you hear about his life that he was a Chicago Lawyer whose son died of scarlet fever at age 4, and yet he wrote the words, "*it is well with my soul.*" You might hear the words differently.

And if you also knew that his real estate holdings were destroyed in the great Chicago fire, and yet he wrote *"it is well with my soul."* You might consider his words and witness more carefully.

And then if you heard that he sent his wife and daughters to Europe after the fire, to recover after their great loss, and his four daughters were killed at sea, and only his wife survived, you might again hear the words that he penned as he travelled to be with his wife in a different way. His words and life are the witness together.

His example and witness gives us courage, helps us to hold fast to our faith.

Maybe you are not like Haratio Spafford, but are more like E. Stanley Jones. Jones tells a story about himself that he as a young man felt called into ministry, he thought he would be a great lawyer for God, defending God, arguing God's case with conviction. Shortly after his decision to train for ministry he was asked to preach at an evening service.

He prepared well, and ascended into the pulpit.

In his message he used a word that he had never used before or since "indifferentism" this caused a young woman in the congregation to snicker, head down. In that moment E. Stanley Jones lost everything he was going to say. After moments of awkward silence he came down from the pulpit, his preaching career ended before it started. At the bottom of the steps, nudged by the Holy Spirit he was asked by God, have I done nothing for you?, have you nothing to share as a witness?

The words came "Friends, you know I cannot preach, but I love Jesus." "I am determined to love and serve him." Suddenly his story came pouring out of him, how God had saved him, how God had turned his life around. At the end of the message that was preached from the bottom of the steps, a young man came forward and wanted the salvation that E. Stanley Jones had found.

God didn't need a lawyer. God needed a witness.

He said; "We cannot merely talk about Christ. We hear or meet people who are like us, who have witnessed the grace and forgiveness of God, who are disciples of Jesus, and suddenly, sometimes for the first time, we consider that God's gift might be for us also. Our witness, our experience, our lives show what Christian faith is really about, what the love of Jesus is enfleshed.

I can learn *about* being a disciple, but it is through living as a disciple in the community of disciples, the church, that God shapes me and forms the life of Christ in me.

Lastly, notice that disciples are not commissioned individually.

They are called together, to witness together, with the Holy Spirit with them to correct and empower them.

We are not witnesses alone.

We are not disciples alone.

We will not carry out our mission without error, or stumbling.

We are not perfect as Christ was perfect.

We still doubt, still stumble, still are in need of repentance and forgiveness, even as we are proclaiming it to others.

But together we forgive and are forgiven.

When we show a *faithless* example, then in faith we repent, turn, are forgiven, restored, and grow. Even our sin can be opportunities for God's grace to be revealed.

God didn't send an idea, or a fact, God sent his Son, and then God sent out witnesses, you and me.

Thanks be to God!