



**“CALL YOUR NEXT WITNESS”**  
**SCRIPTURE JOEL 2: 23-32; LUKE 18: 9-14**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**October 23, 2016**  
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Old men dreaming dreams  
Prophetic daughters

Young ones with fresh visions  
And captives come into wide-open spaces

No more shame  
The survivors will flourish

The humble justified  
The arrogant dismantled  
Contempt evaporates  
And a witness' silence abates

O to inhabit such a world  
Strange and wonderful  
To touch it, to see  
To believe

To witness such a world  
A world where old men dream dreams  
And women speak bold truth.

It is a world that stretches out ahead of us in the narratives our faith tells us—that God will make things right, that God assures justice, and that the haughty will be brought down from their destructive thrones and the humble will be healed, the survivors will flourish.

And we are called to testify to this vision, this dream, this predicted state of spiritual equilibrium, of souls well with God.

We are to witness to the truth of redemption, to the reality of the power and promise of God's transforming love.

When I say “we,” I mean you and me. Sounds like a straightforward task for us Christians, but witnessing is not an untroubled task. In fact, sometimes it can feel like an impossible task, or if not impossible, a futile task.

How do we bear witness to a loving, healing God in a world of such pain, such brutality, such betrayal? What are we bearing witness to in a faith tradition that has a complicated history and a languishing present, even a doubtful future?

It can be hard to parse out our own language in the Christian faith when so much of it has been appropriated to prop up the institution, rather than to tell people about how our lives have been changed by Jesus. There are times when I feel like the church went and stole Jesus and altered him so much that he is someone I barely recognize.

In a world where we can actually purchase a bobble head Jesus playing football in sandals and a white robe, you know we've distorted the Prince of Peace in some pretty profound ways.

And the bobble head isn't the worst Jesus impersonator we have in the world today. We've got Jesus the warrior, Jesus the hater, Jesus the line drawer, Jesus the comforter of the powerful, and Jesus the chief maintenance man of the institutional church.

Jesus was even put to work justifying the Holocaust.

What does it mean to witness to such a malleable savior, to such a shape-shifting God? Is witnessing just a way for each of us to justify our desires for a God made in our image?

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Societal horrors like the Holocaust, chattel slavery, genocide of first nations people all riddle the act of witnessing with questions of reliability, veracity, and even purpose.

If the way our savior and our faith has been employed for harm does not chill our blood, then we are not paying attention. Witnessing is a troubled and troubling task. And it is a task we are required to perform as people who follow Jesus.

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A small group of Jews gathered to pray in a synagogue in Europe during Nazi occupation. Their prayers were interrupted by a Jew they knew to be pious—he was, like many Jews in Europe at this time, going mad. He came in forcefully to the prayer gathering and admonished those praying after he had listened quietly to their prayers. “Shhh! Don't pray so loud! God will hear you and then know that there are still some Jews left alive in Europe.”<sup>1</sup>

The horror is not that God has disappeared or been shown to be an illusion. This pious man's madness comes from the fact that God exists in a world in which Jews were being exterminated.

God is not dead. Even more grotesque, God is alive in a world of complete and utter insanity.

Witnessing to God's existence, to God's presence is madness, says Emil Fackenheim. But the witness does not flee, the witness does not fall silent. "Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories."<sup>2</sup>

After Auschwitz, the Jewish witness is called to endurance, called to defiance. Anything less is doing Hitler's work. He attempted to completely silence, to exterminate all memory, to disappear a people who had believed in the midst of not just suffering, but intentional annihilation.

To witness is to defy the victory of silencing attempted by genocide. To witness is to defy the erasure that violence seeks to secure.

Even fragments of untellable stories, even shards of defiance and surviving witness to a truth that must be told.

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At the same time silence must be defied, the Holocaust defies the existence of witnesses themselves—the horror of it creates an impossibility for those who live in the experience to witness what is happening to them, to those around them.

And so, the story must be told at the same time it is untellable. And saying too much is just another way to silence the unfathomable reality of what occurred.

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Luke passage: Piety is not about virtue; it is about one's relatedness to God. The praying Pharisee kept council with himself. The tax collector prayed from his absolute dependence on God. He counted himself not worthy, but in complete and utter need. He named no contempt or superiority to others; he named only his need for mercy.

An act of trust to put our "worst foot forward" instead of prettying ourselves up to try and distinguish ourselves from the less virtuous, the less good, the less acceptable.

Just being honest about who we are in a sacred space (like the pious Jew who quieted those praying in the synagogue) is a radical act of witnessing. And this is a radical act of witnessing especially in a denomination that has prided itself on decency and order, on being polished up and always "fine."

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Grace Covenant, we are called to witness to a living, breathing God, a savior who heals and who can spot insincerity in a heartbeat.

You are hearing a lot here at Grace Covenant these last few weeks about the courage that it takes to be a faithful person these days.

You are each being asked to invest in a community that is all about mustering up the courage to speak the beautiful truths we know—that Jesus isn't a tool of the powerful or a mouthpiece of the status quo—he is our rock and our redeemer. He is the one who blazes the trails we follow to dream of a better world. And not just dream, but risk ourselves to see it come to pass.

Grace Covenant, we are witnesses to an unlikely reality—Jesus is thriving in post-Christian America right here in our midst. He is showing up all over the place—in moments of grace and transformation, in moments of compassion and connection, in the unfolding wonder of healing, second chances, and even a home for the exiles.

We are a witness to Jesus' refusal to let organized religion be an instrument of his demise. Let's say it loud and clear in the ways we pool our resources to do the work we are called to do here—the work of truth telling, the work of celebrating good news in a world that is groaning in travail, the work of dangerous imagination—dreaming of a world that has no place for abusive power, that has no place for oppression and violence, in the work of compassion and meeting pain with tender mercies.

The institutional church is dying—and some are saying that means we are becoming a godless society. I say the church choked out some of Jesus's most able witnesses. Any institution who says they should define and describe your experience of God is out to destroy the fingerprints of God in our lives.

The disintegration of institutional Christianity, the splintering of organized religion breaks open a place where you and I can speak freely of the God who holds us in the dark, the Jesus who walks with us in loneliness, the Christ who enters into spaces of injustice and oppression, the Jesus who heals the wounds that afflict us.

The church is not God.  
The Bible is not God.

Jesus is alive and well in the world  
God is not dead

We are the next witnesses in the long line of witnesses of a rag tag group of unlikely truth tellers who say "I have seen the Lord."

You have a part of the story that needs to be told. It is not the whole story and telling your story opens you up to hearing the story of another and another, receiving the

bits and pieces of a world's beauty in treasured moments and snatches of what is real.

Silence is not the answer  
Saying too much is not the answer

This is a holy poetics that you and I are living into—world without end, words that are but fragments, bodies that speak, that testify to a resurrection, a regeneration, a redemption that lives and breathes and seeks audibility among us.

"I remember," Elie Wiesel writes, "during those years, when we were dreamless old children in a kingdom called Night, we had but one wish left but it was a burning desire: to bear witness."<sup>3</sup>

Dreamless children in a kingdom called Night—burning with the desire to bear witness.

Dreamless children and old men dreaming dreams, young ones with visions and women with bold truths. Evaporated contempt, dissipated arrogance. The sincerity of grief, the integrity of compassion that comes from struggles. The call to witness is a call to truth—yours, mine, even ours when we catch a glimpse of it in our midst.

Call your next witness, God of mercy, God of love, God of broken and betrayed bodies, God who redeems the irredeemable. We don't have the whole story, but we can speak of what we know here. Jesus is at work—and we are mustering up all the courage we can to say "yes" out loud for everyone to hear.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Explorations*, 67.

<sup>2</sup> Fackenheim, 84.

<sup>3</sup> Elie Wiesel, "To Remain Human in Face of Inhumanity," condensed from an address, *The Jewish Digest*, XVII (September, 1972), p.40.