



All Of Us Are Witnesses..
Sermon by Deacon Heather Feltman
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What if these walls could talk? Look around this space for a moment. Since the 1950's these walls have heard thousands of sermons, some great and inspiring, and others, well, you know. These walls have heard how many renditions of A Mighty Fortress is Our God and Silent Night? These walls have heard the cries of families mourning, the joy of baby's cries at baptism, and the funny comments made by little ones during the children's message; these walls have heard the spoken vows of couples joining together in marriage, passionate and heated discussions during congregation meetings and countless prayers uplifted among those sitting in the pews as you are now. If only these walls could talk, we would hear some stories – but we know they can't, and that's where we come in!

In today's verses from Acts we hear Peter's first sermon. Peter preaches it in Jerusalem, about 50 days after Jesus' execution. Easter has changed everything for them. They have felt God's fire on their heads and God's wind in their faces. They are all different. Things they have been afraid of, do not frighten them anymore. They have found new strength in themselves, new wisdom they never knew they had.

Peter is hanging out with the other disciples, when they are filled with the Holy Spirit, and each one of them begins to speak in a different language!

Imagine what that must have sounded like! In the midst of this cacophony of voices, the crowds gather, and the questions begin – what is going on? What does this mean? They are in the grips of something that bypasses reason, and some of them cannot bear it, so some of them start hunting for a reason.

And leave it to Peter –impulse-control-issued, Christ-denying-but-getting-his-groove-back, sword-swinging, fisherman Peter to confront these unbelievers about the miraculous indwelling of the Holy Spirit!

Peter says, (my translation): “Well, yeah, I guess we could be drunk, and I’m not saying that there are not a few of us here that have had a few already, but darn –it’s 9am, and we have important work to do today! Seriously, this is the work of the Lord” And then he goes on to say, “And if you read the prophet Joel....” Only Peter would start his sermon addressing the booze question before quoting Torah!

Peter gets up and delivers a sensational sermon, based on the second chapter of Joel. “In the last days,” Peter proclaims, quoting Joel quoting God, “I’ll pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young shall see visions, and your old will dream dreams.

That is what is happening now, Peter tells them. The Holy Spirit of God is being poured out on them and this is how it looks: wind like the wind that revives the valley of dry bones, and fire like the fire that led Israel through the desert, and tongues like the tongues that erupted Babel, but only now in reverse this time.

You see the Bible speaks of the Holy Spirit in two ways – first, the abiding presence of God in Christ, with all the safety and comfort that relationship promises. This is the Spirit most of us know and love—the Spirit of peace and concord—the one that smooths our ruffled feathers, calms our frayed nerves, and revives our weary souls! We have the sense to breathe in deep and say thank you God!

But there is another way the Spirit acts –not another spirit, but another manifestation of the same Spirit—and it is not nearly so comforting. This is the Spirit who blows and burns, that howls from the sky and overturns all the lawn furniture! Ask Job about the whirlwind, or Ezekiel about the chariot of fire. Ask any of those folks who were in that room on Pentecost what it was like to be caught up in the Spirit, and in all candor; with these images in mind, I think we might think twice before we would be a fool to pray “Come, Holy Spirit!”

I heard an Episcopal bishop once say that the Spirit is most present at three open spaces in our lives: in the unpredictable, in the place of risk, and in those areas which we have no control.

Which is where the disciples are in our reading for today. And that is where we are ourselves, more times than we would care to admit, are too—not only as individuals, but also as members of this sacred body that was born over two thousand years ago!

You see what Peter and the others have to do is turn the Easter story into an Easter community whose lives together will be a sign of Christ’s ongoing life in the world.

If you listen carefully, you can hear all this going on in Peter's sermon – Peter, who of all the disciples has been the most prone to say crazy, impulsive things, suddenly sounds a bit like an archangel – sharing the words of the prophet Joel and speaking of Jesus' life and death!

For the disciples, when they learn that day that they are witnesses, something happens. They cannot walk away. They cannot forget. Witnesses cannot be passive. They are now part of the story. Jesus tells his disciples, "You will be by witnesses." There are no ifs, ands, or buts. You will be.

Jesus is asking, "Can I get a witness?"

When you hear the word, 'witness', what is the first thing you think about? For many it might be in reference to judicial court.

Maybe a witness for the prosecution, or a witness for the defense. Or maybe someone is quoted in the newspaper as the witness to some news-worthy event.

Simply, a witness tells what they have seen and experienced and heard in their own lives.

That is what Jesus is trying to tell us when he says, "You will be my witnesses." What are your stories? What do you know to be true? Under the power of the Holy Spirit, shy people have been known to step up onto platforms and say amazing and prophetic things. Cautious people have become daredevils, frugal people have become philanthropists, and people who used to be sour as dill pickles have become blessed with many friends.

You see, there is no limit to what the Holy Spirit can do. We cannot hold our breath. We have to breathe, breathe deep, so to receive our life as a gift invisible as the air that we take in!

We also need to keep paying attention, keep responding to whatever crazy idea we come up with next. Some people call it intuition. Others call it inspiration. Forever and ever, the church has called it Holy Spirit!

Dear siblings in Christ, what are you hoping is a story we are telling about our church 5 years from now? How about ten years from now? When we witness, we simply share what we know to be true for us. We are not forcing someone into seeing things exactly how we see them. We can simply begin by saying, "This is how it is for me. This is what I have experienced." It is a humble, grace filled, gentle, loving act to share your story with someone else.

It does not have to be yelling from atop a mountain, or from the steps of a train platform, it could simply be sharing with someone at work who is going through a hard time how prayer or worship or this church community has helped you when you have had a rough time. It could be sharing your story of coming to terms in living with an addiction with someone who needs that encouragement in that specific moment and time.

Maybe you show your children and family through your volunteering and service how much helping others means to you and how it can make a positive difference in someone's life!

You see, our purpose in life, everything we do, is to remember Christ's call to us: we are witnesses. We are the ones who are called to tell the story of Christ's grace and Christ's love.

The story is told in how we share our talents and our excess. It's told in every choice we make. We are called to **be** witnesses—to be present, to be with others, to be in the moment.

There are times when the best loving and caring witness to someone is silence and just giving the gift of your presence. And just as we give to others expecting nothing in return, we share our witness expecting nothing back either.

About 3,000 people are baptized as a result of Peter's sermon –that really is some altar call, isn't it! And afterwards, they all devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, and to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

As Pastor Paisley invited those gathered last week for worship, I too, invite you to take a bit of time this week to reflect on how the Holy Spirit is an active, moving presence in your life. Consider how God has changed you. And remember to share your story in word and deed with others. Because remember, these walls can't talk. They have some great stories to tell, but the stories this building bears will never be heard unless we share them!

Let's be bold enough to pray, "Come, Holy Spirit, Come!"

And we might just want to hold onto our hats! Cause, you just never know!

Thanks be to God!

Amen.