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The Acts of the Apostles
I. You Will Be My Witnesses
Acts 1:1-11

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I suppose it may seem odd to celebrate both the Wise Men visiting and Jesus ascending on the same Sunday.¹ But actually these two events are closely connected. The visit of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus points us backward to the covenant God had made with Abraham – the very plan of salvation which then unfolds throughout the rest of Scripture.² God had covenanted with Abraham that He would bless Abraham’s descendants, in order that one day in the future a salvation would come forth from out of Abraham’s descendants which would reach out into all the rest of the tribes and nations and peoples on earth. The Wise Men, who were not of Abraham’s lineage, represent that the second part of God’s covenant promise to Abraham – the part about salvation going forth from out of Israel into all the earth – is about to come to pass through the birth of Jesus. That Jesus is, at long last, the fulfillment of God’s promise to redeem, not just Israel, but all the nations.

And it is this covenant promise pointed to by the visit of the Wise Men which is then confirmed as having been fulfilled in Jesus by the events surrounding Jesus’ Ascension. If the wise men point backwards to the covenant promise of salvation coming through Israel into all the earth, then the Ascension of Jesus marks the beginning of that covenant promise actually coming to pass. For during His brief earthly ministry, Jesus confined His message and miracles mostly to His own people, the descendants of Abraham, Israel. But now, as He prepares to ascend to His throne in heaven, He specifically announces that the time has come for the Good News of the salvation He has accomplished through His cross and resurrection to go out from Israel into all the earth, to all the peoples.

So, before He ascends, He gives this specific instruction to His disciples: that they are now to be His witnesses “*in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” Picture it as a set of concentric circles, each one centered on Jesus and each one larger than the one before – until finally, the last circle, is nothing less than the entire globe upon which we live: Jerusalem → Judea → Samaria → the ends of the earth. The prophecy the wise men represent is now to be fulfilled in history by the disciples of Jesus as they carry the Good News of God’s salvation in Christ into all the earth – that everyone, every tribe, every people, may hear that Good News of great joy that Jesus Christ is both Savior and Lord for all the earth.

Which, then, is where we come into the picture. We, as the disciples of Christ in this time and place, are the inheritors of this mission Jesus gave to His first disciples in that time and place: “*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 end of the earth.” As the disciples of Jesus Christ here and now, this is here and now our mission, our charge, our service to the Savior of all the earth. We are to be His witnesses here and now to His salvation, His love, His grace, even to the ends of the earth. We are to be the ones now bearing this Good News to others. We are to be instruments through whom God moves forward the final fulfillment of His covenant plan of salvation – that coming day when, as the Psalmist describes it:

*The whole earth, from end to end, will remember
and come back to the Lord;
all the families of the nations
will bow down before him.
For the Lord reigns,
the ruler of the nations!*³

“You,” Jesus now says to us, “*You will be my witnesses*” – until that day when He returns and His Kingdom comes and His love shall reign forevermore on earth as it is in heaven.

“*You will be my witnesses.*” So what, then, does this look like in practice? Richard John Neuhaus, the Lutheran and later Catholic theologian, tells of catching a train with a friend in New York’s Grand Central Terminal:

*We were taking a train from Grand Central Station, where at any moment one sees thousands, even tens of thousands, of the hurried, harried and worried; it seems the entire human condition on disorderly parade. Musicians regularly perform in the great hall of Grand Central, and today it was a young woman singing “Amazing Grace” with a voice of crystalline purity that echoed through the crowded chamber. “How very said,” observed my Christian friend, “that so many of those people do not know Jesus as their Savior.” And of course she is right, it is very sad. Yet I confess that my sensation was very different, looking at this ragtag horde of humanity. How amazing the grace, I thought, that all of them, all of this, all is redeemed.*⁴

That last sentence is key, I think, to understanding what it means to be witnesses to Christ – “*How amazing the grace . . . that all of them, all of this, all is redeemed.*” Witnessing is graciously conveying the grace of Christ. Witnessing is not “converting” people – only God can convert. And witnessing is not coercing people – coercion of any sort is not the way by which Jesus operates. Witnessing begins in looking out upon others and seeing their great need (as well as our own) in light of God’s great gift of amazing grace. It is not about grabbing people on the street, getting in their face and demanding, “*Are you saved?*” It is about listening for the moments God will create where we can tell someone else about the love God has for them, about the grace God wishes to show them, about the new hope and new life God desires to make possible for them in Jesus.

And, as such, witnessing can only be understood as a joy! The joy of telling others – as the angels told the shepherds – the joy of telling others of the Good News of great joy that God has for them in Jesus Christ. It is the joyous privilege of being able:

- to share with the one who is sick that we know of One who is the Great Physician;
- to announce to the one who is in troubled in mind or spirit that we know where comfort can be found;
- to reassure the one going through some story of life that there is One who can calm the raging sea;
- to declare to the one who is feeling guilty or ashamed that there is One whose mercy is from everlasting to everlasting;
- to encourage the one who is losing hope or who is feeling lost and alone that there is One who will never forsake them;
- the joy of being able to comfort the one who is dying with the promise that there is One whose love for him or her is stronger even than death.

Being witnesses to Jesus Christ is not a burden, an unpleasant obligation. It is the joy of being able to announce, into the darkness of this world and its suffering, that there is an Eternal Light, an Abundant Mercy, and an Everlasting Love who has got this whole world – Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, even the ends of the earth – in His gracious and all-powerful and redeeming hands. Good news of great joy!

But this is also something important about our witnessing – that it isn't just through our words that we bear witness to His grace, but also through our works. In fact, witnessing requires at least some correlation between our works and our words, if we are to be believed. I remember back in preaching class in seminary, one of my classmates preached a beautiful sermon on the love of God – beautiful words. But our teacher, the wonderful Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier, identified a significant flaw in his delivery of that sermon. She said to him, *“You cannot convince others about the love of God when your own hands are balled up into fists!”* At the height of his sermon, he had pounded the pulpit with his fists while declaring that *“God loves you!”* Dr. Achtemeier said the gesture must match the message – and suggested that he announce that *“God loves you!”* not with his fists, but with his arms stretched out and palms open to the congregation. So in our witnessing. It's not just about our words, it is also about how we deliver them – and love would be precisely the right description for how we are to deliver them. It's not just what we say about God's grace that matters in our witnessing to others, it's also about whether they can see in us evidence of that grace at work.

For example, a pastor was greeting a visitor at the door following the church service, and was pleased to discover that she had come because of the kindness of one of the church's members who was also her neighbor. She said:

I'm recently divorced, a single parent and new to this community . . . To keep up with rent and provide for my three children, I must work two jobs. That leaves me very little time for yard work. I was relieved when the weeds didn't overrun my yard as I had feared they might. However, when I made an unscheduled trip home in the middle of my workday, I discovered the reason why the weeds had not taken over my yard.

My 86-year-old neighbor – a member of your church – was on his hands and knees pulling my weeds. I barely knew this man and he was embarrassed to be caught in this anonymous act of kindness. He explained that he heard you preach a sermon on the importance of living a life of compassion and kindness and decided to put that sermon into practice weeding my lawn.⁵

“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 end of the earth.” And sometimes the most profound witness we can offer others concerning the grace of God is not our words about that grace, but the evidence of what His grace can do and has done in us.

Or this. I think it is my very favorite witnessing story – a story about a woman named Mandy and the local church which together led her to the saving grace of Jesus. Mandy had grown up in a horrible situation. Her parents had been through so many marriages and divorces that she had trouble keeping track. She had been abused by some of the men her mother had taken up with – and, in time, had developed her own issues with promiscuity, drugs, and alcohol. And all of this by the time she was in high school. Her adult life was not turning out any better. She spent her days angry, resentful, depressed, self-pitying, and lonely.

And then, one day, a woman who worked at the same boutique as Mandy asked her to join her in a women's retreat her church was conducting that weekend. Mandy had developed, by this time, a deep prejudice against all forms of religion, but especially against Christians and Christianity. She saw Christians as particularly judgmental and hypocritical. But there was something about the way this woman had always treated her, and something about the seemingly genuine kindness and interest in her that had come with the invitation – which caused Mandy, in spite of herself and all her suspicions, to accept.

The retreat focused on the love of God. The speaker led them through verse after verse in the Bible that spoke about the healing, restoring, forgiving, life-giving love of God – and it hit Mandy right in the heart. To Mandy, who had never heard this side of Christianity before, it was as if she suddenly had woken up and discovered that God's love for her was this deep vast ocean, just waiting for her to dive in. She could scarcely believe it to be true. But what helped confirm this love of God for her was the love she received from the other women on that retreat. It was not showy, not pushy – it was natural and it was real. They laughed with her, cried with her. They

heard her story and – much to her surprise – they didn’t pull back from her in disgust or judgment. Instead they reached out to her and embraced her with this ocean’s depth of love. Seven years later, she is a completely different person. Seven years later, that Word of God’s love, embodied in the embrace of that congregation, has become in her a spring of water welling up into eternal life.⁶ Witnessing, not just with the words we say, but also with the love we offer – which shows to others the evidence that the saving grace of Jesus Christ is real and available and open to all.

“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 end of the earth.” It is not just a job description for disciples, it is also a joy prescription for disciples. For what could be more rewarding, what privilege could be more precious, what could be more important than to be able to tell another about the Good News of great joy which has come to us from heaven in the form of Jesus? That same Jesus who will one day come again, that our joy – that the joy of all His people of every tribe and nation in all the earth – that our joy should be made forever and complete.

¹ The visit of the Wise Men is found in Matthew 2:1-12.

² Genesis 12:1-3.

³ Psalm 22:27-28 (Jerusalem Bible).

⁴ Richard John Neuhaus, Death on a Friday Afternoon (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp. 160-161.

⁵ Source unknown.

⁶ Mark Buchanan, Your Church Is Too Safe (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), pp. 23-24.