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# Preaching to Shape Christian Witness: He Cannot Be the Messiah, Can He?

Christine M. Bellefeuille

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PREACHING TO SHAPE CHRISTIAN WITNESS: HE CANNOT BE THE MESSIAH,  
CAN HE?

by

CHRISTINE M. BELLEFEUILLE

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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## ABSTRACT

*Preaching to Shape Christian Witness: He Cannot be the Messiah, Can He?*

by

Christine M. Bellefeuille

This action-reflection project explores the effectiveness of preaching in shaping witnesses to tell their own stories of their experiences of God. Uses preaching that models witness, helps the listener identify experiences of God and offers language for disciples to use in their own witness. Also explores the challenges of preaching to a congregation that has experienced uncertain theological grounding and conflict. Other considerations explored are trust, changing calls mid-doctoral program, and project fit.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, the congregation I served was doing a Lenten Evening Worship series on everyday evangelism. For each service, we invited someone from the congregation or the community to talk about how they share their faith in their workplaces and everyday lives.

Articulate and thoughtful, Suzanne was a mid-level executive in a large global corporation and a leader in the congregation. She readily agreed to be one of the speakers. About two weeks before she was scheduled to share her story, she phoned me, concerned. She had practiced her “speech” for her husband and his response was, “You sound like you are describing a social club, not a church.”

Suzanne and I met for lunch and she gave me the highlights of her speech. She talked about the strong friendships, support, and fellowship she and her family enjoyed at church. She said the church was her community; she and her family felt a strong sense of belonging. There was nothing in her remarks that could not just as easily be said about another membership-based service organization, country club, business networking group, yoga studio, or any number of places of belonging.

Suzanne was a bit at sea. She didn’t believe she had other language for describing what was particular about belonging to a church. She didn’t believe she had the capacity to describe her own lived experience of God. She didn’t know what else to say.

Suzanne grew up in the “heyday” of the Christian church of the 1960s and ‘70s when membership was booming, Sunday Schools were filled, and volunteers were abundant. Suzanne did not become a Christian by conversion or the joyous “discovery” of the Gospel. Suzanne never knew a day that she was not part of a church community. Such was true for many Americans of her age. Everyone seemed to belong somewhere.

For most of the twentieth century, in White Christian America, the terms “Christian” and “Protestant” were virtually synonymous. Questions like “And where to you go to church?” felt appropriate in casual social interactions or even business exchanges. White Christian America was a place where few gave a second thought to saying “Merry Christmas!” to strangers on the street. It was a world of shared rhythms that punctuated the week: Wednesday spaghetti suppers and prayer meetings, invocations from local pastors under the Friday night lights at high school football games, and Sunday blue laws that shuttered Main Street for the Sabbath.<sup>1</sup>

I would argue that while that era was a *membership* peak for the American church, it wasn’t necessarily a *spiritual* peak. It was an era of booming involvement for nearly *all* membership-based service organizations. It was an era of belonging. “Clubs” were the extended family groups that gave shape, meaning, and rhythm to people’s lives. My own family of origin moved about every three years because of my dad’s job. In addition to finding a church in our new town, my parents also quickly joined a “club,” such as Newcomers or the Jaycees.

Moreover, during this era, many of the clubs were somehow strangely linked to church, functioning almost as extension of the church or as parachurch organizations. This gave shape to the illusion of “White Christian America,” and perhaps inevitably linked the fate of churches to that of the clubs.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 38.

In its heyday, a set of linked institutions reinforced White Christian America's worldview across generations: the Young Men's Christian Associations (YMCA), the Boy Scouts, the Masonic Lodge, and the local country club with limits or even outright bans on membership for Catholics, Jews, and ethnic minorities. White Christian America had its golden age in the 1950s. . . . To be sure, this seemingly seamless world was never as all encompassing [sic] as it pretended. It always operated parallel to the rich religious and cultural domain of African American Protestants. . . . For most of the nation's life, White Christian America was big enough, cohesive enough, and influential enough to pull off the illusion that it was the cultural pivot around which the country turned—at least for those living safely within its expansive confines. But this artifice weakened as White Christian America shrank in size and the power of its institutions dwindled.<sup>2</sup>

Today, most membership-based service organizations and churches share the same lament. A quick troll of the internet reveals abundant articles about organizations fretting over declining membership: Lions, Eagles, Elks, Kiwanis, Rotary, Knights of Columbus, and others. Because “club” membership seems to be down across the board, it stands to reason that churches would experience a similar decline, especially if membership and belonging—rather than spiritual growth and discipleship—were at the core of people's engagement in church.

While the purpose of my project is not to ensure “institutional survival,” it's important that we explore the church as a membership institution because it is, as Jones so well articulates, such a foundational framework for many Americans—like Suzanne and her contemporaries—who wield or have wielded authority and financial power in our country.

Ultimately, for the church to be a vibrant community of disciples, rather than merely members, committed to life together in Christ for the sake of the world, we need disciples who are also witnesses to the life-transforming wonder of the Gospel and the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

Jesus we find there. Thus as preachers, we must explore how preaching can break through our listeners' self-imposed limits to inspire them, release them, impel them into their neighborhoods like the Samaritan woman who, in spite of her perceived limits, was willing to witness to her own encounter with God, even as she asked the question, "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" The purpose of my project was to attempt to do just that.

### **Problem**

How do members become witnesses who tell the story of God rather than recruiters trying to keep club numbers up? How *does* the church become more than club?

The Minneapolis and Saint Paul Area Synod Joint Ministerium held a Reformation Day celebration at Christ the King Lutheran Church in New Brighton, MN, on October 31, 2018. A panel of speakers was asked: "What should the Lutheran movement be passionate about as we turn 501?"

Bishop Peter Rogness observed that institutions were created to sustain and support good things. Schools were created to support the education of children. Hospitals were created to sustain and support healthcare. Governments were created to sustain and support infrastructure and aspects of communal life. Churches were created to sustain and support the faithful and the work of faith. He went on to say that institutions are good until they become more focused on their own life than on the value and mission they were created to support.

The purpose of this project is not to argue for the survival of the institution per se. Rather, I will argue for preaching that shapes witnesses to the Gospel such that we are no longer trying to talk people into joining a club, but instead into sharing an experience of

God that is personal, universally available and so transformative that it entices people to come and see what we are talking about, to come and encounter the living God.

### What is Witness?

Paul Ricoeur, describing both testimony and witness, writes: “The witness is witness to things which have happened.”<sup>3</sup> Long describes the role of a courtroom witness: “The witness has seen something, and the witness is willing to tell the truth about it-- the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”<sup>4</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, the definition with which I am working is that a witness is simply one who tells others what they have seen, heard or experienced that they think or hope might be of God.

Why tell what we have seen or heard? Tom Long, speaking to preaching, could also be making the case for personal, individual witness: “As a matter of fact, people have a rather remarkable capacity to enter imaginatively into the experiences of others and then to take what they have seen and heard and learned into their own lives.”<sup>5</sup> We bear witness to what we have seen, heard or experienced so that others might be encouraged or inspired to come and take a closer look at this community that is more than club and perhaps be awakened to the possibility of their own experience of God. There is a fuller discussion of the role of the community in this act of witness on page 31 of this paper.

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<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 134.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 176.

<sup>5</sup>Long, 41 .

### More About the “Club”

Robert Jones has a front piece to his book referenced above that he titles “An Obituary for White Christian America.” In it he describes the contributions of White Christian America (WCA) to our nation “as a cultural touchstone during most of its life. It provided a shared aesthetic, a historical framework, and a moral vocabulary.”<sup>6</sup> Jones is speaking of a broader cultural movement that has as its framework the mostly Protestant Church. It isn’t a stretch to apply what he says of the movement to the congregations and denominations connected with it.

While WCA did provide all that he suggests, what WCA did not seem to provide—either to the culture at large or to the churches that were part of it—was a spiritual vibrancy or connection to the ineffable. The churches provided a culturally sanctioned place to belong but without necessarily a deeper connection to God as experienced in faith community. Indeed, the church remained—while perhaps the largest and most powerful—just another club to bring identity and, hopefully, meaning to people’s lives.

Jones seems to argue for this. In spite of aspirations that had more to do with institutional vitality and survival than with witness to the living God, “. . .the roots of mainline Protestantism’s institutional woes are not to be found primarily in theological soil. . .”<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, there have been a number of articles and polls about the vitality of church affiliation and faith in America. Among the more notable are a *Newsweek* article

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<sup>6</sup> Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 201.

from April 2009, *The End of White Christian America*, and the Pew Research Report from May 2015, *America's Changing Religious Landscape*.<sup>8</sup>

Diana Butler Bass responds to the *Newsweek* article in her book *Christianity After Religion*:

For a couple of years prior to the *Newsweek* story, I had been pointing out to denominational executives, seminary presidents, and clergy leaders that the demographics of Christianity as a whole—not just liberal religion or Roman Catholicism or mainline Protestantism—were changing in unprecedented ways and that surveys indicated less religiosity in the United States than was historically the case. People were skeptical, insisting that the evangelical, conservative and megachurch Christianity was still growing. But there it was in black and white (and red) in *Newsweek*. Christianity of all sorts is struggling in America.<sup>9</sup>

Bass continues,

“This is not to say that the Christian God is dead,” John Meacham stated, “but that he is less of a force in American politics and culture than at any other time in recent memory. To the surprise of liberals who fear the advent of an evangelical theocracy and to the dismay of religious conservatives who long to see their faith more fully expressed in public life, Christians are now making up a declining percentage of the American population.”<sup>10</sup>

It is clear from Bass, Jones, and anecdotal experience that people who have been part of the church for their whole lives are frightened about the future. Yet most conversations that I hear about the future have to do with numbers, growth, and budgets rather than God and authentic sharing of the Gospel. Those “inside” the church are in conflict among themselves about that future growth.

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<sup>8</sup> “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” (Pew Research Center, May 2015), <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

<sup>9</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of the Christian Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



I have a friend who has long been affiliated with the conservative Evangelical arm of Christianity. In spite of having a lesbian twin sister, she remains outspoken about her conservative values, especially with regard to sexuality, gender issues, and reproductive rights. She is openly chagrined about what feels to her like a loosening morality in our country. She bases her position on her biblically-shaped faith.

She and her family were part of a mission start congregation for decades, begun in a high school gym and growing into a sprawling campus in the suburbs. And yet, she and her husband have largely disconnected from participation in a congregation and from any formal practice of religion. So while she is mourning alongside many lifelong Christians, what is she mourning? One could argue that she is mourning the changing culture more than the declining church. Otherwise, would she not herself be working for the vibrancy of the church she once loved? If not working on behalf of her original congregation, then at least *a* congregation?

Or perhaps she is placing her confidence in the likely survival of something resembling the culture she once knew as Jones reflects?

As sympathetic or unsympathetic as one may be to white Christians' plight at this critical juncture in American history, one simple fact remains: White Christian America will be survived by significant numbers of its descendants. There is much at stake for the country in whether these survivors retreat into disengaged enclaves, band together to launch repeated rounds of what the sociologist Nathan Glazer has called "defensive offensives"—in which a formerly powerful majority recasts itself as a beleaguered minority in an attempt to preserve its particular social values—or find a way to integrate into the new American cultural landscape."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 43-44.

However confident we may be in our God, there seems to be less confidence in the future of the church than trust in its glorious past. This is reflected by Jones.

Confronted with the psychic discomfort that results from a lack of cultural confidence and security, the greatest threat to White Christian America's descendants is the siren song of nostalgia. Faced with an unfamiliar cultural landscape, today's white mainline Protestants may find it easier to skip excursions altogether, preferring instead to huddle in their homes and churches around yellowing photo albums of journeys past.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly the first Christians had little by way of cultural confidence. It might be tempting to claim that this new impulse to cloister is an effort to faithfully recapture the oppressed, persecuted rebellion that was the early church. While safety was certainly an issue for the tiny beleaguered early church, institutional survival was not. Jesus' disciples and the church of the first century or so never held a place of priority and power in the broader culture. To sequester and cloister in an effort to preserve something that once was is not authentic discipleship, nor is it a transformative public witness to Christ.

Some have assigned the decline of the church to the apparent disinterest of Millennials and the subsequent generation to "join" or to take up the reins of congregational leadership that Boomers are laying down. NYU Professor Michael Hout was asked whether Millennials are broadly rejecting "traditional institutions" or if "organized religion (is) the only institution being affected." He responded: "Oh, it is widespread. It's just easier to quantify religious change because we have such good data on it. But Millennials' faith in nonreligious institutions also is weaker than (it) used to be."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 230.

<sup>13</sup> David Masci, "Q&A: Why Millennials Are Less Religious Than Older Americans," <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/08/qa-why-millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-americans/> (accessed February 26, 2017).

Furthermore, Hout noted: “Millennials. . . require very little in the way of institutional involvement. They also are harbingers of the ‘make your own way’ or ‘do-it-yourself’ religion that characterizes this group.”<sup>14</sup>

When asked about Millennials’ willingness to “share their faith” (which was Suzanne’s conundrum) he replied:

I have to admit that the data on “sharing faith” is a bit confounding. But I’m sure many Millennials who said they share their faith don’t mean that they engage in missionary work. The choice of the word “share” is vague, so maybe some of them who answered the question thought of it in a more casual way, as in they discuss religion with others.<sup>15</sup>

Hout’s comment about what it means to share faith—and the allusion to the fact that some see mission work as “sharing faith”—highlights the challenge pastors and preachers face in helping members understand what it means to talk about our faith or bear witness to our God—as opposed to discussing religion—and how to equip them for that task. Many will see “doing” as sufficient witness and will decline to say more, deeming it unnecessary or intrusive and themselves ill-equipped to be witnesses to the Gospel or even to their own experiences of God.

But if we are to be witnesses and bearers of the good news, we need language, courage, and support. And we need the will to overcome our belief that belonging to a church is just like belonging to another club and demands of us only what we are interested and willing to give. The Christian life demands our all. And that is something

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

many (from my observation as a pastor) are simply unwilling to give or as yet have not understood to be the cost of discipleship.

It is a significant agenda to set ourselves to overcome treating church like another club. This is especially the case because we face the impact of a club membership mentality in two central aspects of discipleship: worship attendance and faith formation (or Christian Education). Sports and homework often get prioritized over confirmation class, youth group, or Sunday worship. While many families may strive to make church a priority, it is a rare family that will have their child skip sports practice on a Sunday morning or postpone test prep for worship or faith formation.

Sports are an alluring club that often takes front and center in families' lives, even ahead of homework. It appears that the "clubs" that win in terms of allegiance and commitment may be the clubs that demand the most of their members in exchange for the greater possibility of success, recognition, and advancement. This invites reflection on the relative success of congregations that demand more of their members. But that is a conversation for another day.

Clubs are also only as successful as their ability to engage their members in whatever activity they are about. This is true of congregations as well. Bass suggests:

Many people are just bored. They are bored with church-as-usual, church-as-club, church-as-entertainment, or church-as-work. Many of my friends, faithful churchgoers for decades are dropping out because religion is dull, the purview of folks who never want to change or always want to fight about somebody else's sex life; they see the traditional denominations as full of Mrs. Grundy priggishness. On Sundays, other things are more interesting—the New York Times, sports, shopping, Facebook, family time, working in the garden, biking, hiking sipping lattes at the local coffee shop, meeting up at the dog park, getting the kids to the soccer game. Or just working. With tough economic times, lots of

people work on Sunday mornings, the traditional time to attend to religious obligations.<sup>16</sup>

Not only is the church, like other organizations, facing declining numbers but the church is far from the only organization “doing good” in the world. Many organizations are built on an ethic of service. Colleges and high schools emphasize service learning for their students. Furthermore, the church is not the only and often not the first to arrive when disaster, famine, or other widespread tragedy strikes.

Therefore, if the church is to grow, and more importantly, if people are to encounter the gospel of Jesus Christ, the story people like Suzanne tell must transcend an invitation to join our great “club,” where we have friends and support and good programs. The church needs current church members to develop more than a capacity to tell the story of the organization. We as preachers must help people develop language and an affinity for telling the story of Jesus, of God, of the Holy Spirit by telling our *own* story in our own words. The message of the *organization* (the church) must be grounded in people sharing their own lived experience of God, and in this way shaping their Christian witness.

### **Justification/Rationale**

As stated in the section above, witness is a necessity for both for the dissemination of the good news of Jesus Christ and for congregational/denominational vibrancy. While belonging and being known is a hunger for many, the variety of ways and places for people to belong—should they choose to do so—means the church must

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<sup>16</sup> Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 17.

have a more compelling and engaging story to tell. Otherwise we risk being seen simply as one place of belonging among many.

A pastor friend of mine tells it like this: “If all we can say about the church is that we have meal fellowship, dues, and do good in the world, we are no different than the Rotary.”

The truth is, the church has the best story to tell. We confess Jesus Christ as God’s most powerful Word, a Word of love, grace, and inclusion spoken into an aching and fractured world. Belonging to the church is more than just membership in a good club. It means becoming part of a living organism where one can learn, grow, serve, and develop the practices of discipleship. It is a place for belonging that embraces the fullness of who we are as human beings. The church is a place that prepares us to encounter the living God and the church, ideally, helps us recognize when we have.

Fred Craddock, in speaking to preachers, makes the case for the importance of “ordinary” witness in connecting people to the gospel through the story of their own lived experience:

If Christianity may be called a story, what is the relationship of the teller to the story?

God’s power can be perfected in weakness. In spite of all the frightening implication some might find in such a doctrine, we embrace it as true and Christian.

Kierkegaard has taught us anew that from the standpoint of effective communication of the Christian faith, distance between teller and story can be, finally, fatal.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002), 32.

While not researched in its own right for the purpose of this thesis, it is safe to say that there is veracity and power to sharing one's lived experience, especially where there is a personal relationship that makes witness more powerful than simply going into the byways and saying, "Hey, come to my awesome church." And storytelling is far more powerful than sharing a set of ideas to which we invite someone to intellectually assent.

Richard Lischer's book "The End of Words" speaks to preachers but, like Craddock, bears truth for more personal proclamation.

Kierkegaard said that it is not legitimate to ask a question in one medium and to answer it in another. . . . Desire for the Eucharist cannot be satisfied by a lecture on the Eucharist. The bible witnesses to a complete relationship between God and the world, one that includes ambiguity, suffering, and hope. Its profound questions of meaning cannot be answered by an ordered series of talking points. To do so is to falsify and cheapen divine revelation.<sup>18</sup>

Lischer continues,

How does one reduce to a series of bullet points Abraham's journey of faith, the Lord's agony in Gethsemane, or the psalmists exuberant praise? What would Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech look like in PowerPoint?"<sup>19</sup>

Inviting someone to come to visit a club can be effected with a list of bullet points about why this club is better than that club. But inviting someone to encounter the living God can best be accomplished by one human being authentically bearing witness to their own experience to another human being.

Diana Butler Bass describes a not uncommon encounter where a woman in her congregation invited Bass to serve on the altar guild. Her reason for inviting Bass was: "Because I've been doing it for 35 years. . . and I'm really tired. It is time for someone

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 26.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

else to do it instead.”<sup>20</sup> Bass then goes on to imagine an invitation that might have included the weary woman’s experience of spiritual fulfillment and connection to God through her altar work. Bass reflects:

The difference between what happened and what might have happened clarifies an important dimension of contemporary spirituality. In the first case, she asked me to take on an obligation—one that had worn her down and become rote. In the second, she would have been inviting me into an experience—and a powerful one at that. . . To know why provides a sense of purpose to our actions. If we know why we engage in a particular activity we experience deeper spiritual connections in our work. Why is the meaning behind any sort of work, craft or practice.<sup>21</sup>

The “why” referred to by Bass is the experience of God or the deeper spiritual fulfillment that makes connection to this altar work—or to church, worship, faith formation, or service work—life-giving and captivating. In a simple encounter she aptly describes the importance of our capacity to tell a better story in order to invite, compel, or inspire people to take a closer look. She models what it looks like to make taking a look irresistible!

My current congregation has hosted a lutefisk dinner for decades. Like the woman described in Bass’s encounter, the volunteers are aging and growing tired. The organizers spend a great deal of time recruiting new volunteers to keep the dinner “alive.” One woman suggested requiring our confirmation students to work the dinner. The confirmation students don’t eat lutefisk. Nor do most of their parents. The lutefisk dinner doesn’t resonate with our students as anything more than something we have always done. There is little conversation among the faithful volunteers about the spiritual fulfillment of doing the dinner, how it enriches their faith, or how it supports their

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<sup>20</sup> Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 153.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 154.



experience of God in community. It is simply what our club does every first Thursday in November.

Two additional reasons for learning to bear witness to and to articulate our experience of the God of the gospels are one's understanding of morality—and how Christian faith is expressed through moral choices—and the WCA claim that success is directly linked to faithfulness.

Jesus and the prophets call us to live moral lives tending to the stranger, the widow, and the orphan more than they call us to keep our own noses clean. White Christian America tended to focus on a personal morality over a social one. Many of the clubs that thrived alongside WCA did the same: Masons, Boy Scouts, and others. And somehow, in the midst, personal success got linked to both morality and faithfulness in confounding ways.

Reflecting on the impact of Robert Schuller on WCA, Jones reflects:

Schuller's message was a subtler conservatism, a pro-family ethos that revolved around an axis of personal success, echoing broader Republican economic messages about the evils of dependency and government handouts without specifically endorsing policies or candidates. Failure, he told his congregation, was a matter of personal choice. This was a message that appealed to the white, upwardly mobile, suburban Christians who gathered on Sundays in his sparkling cathedral, or tuned in to watch the Hour of Power. The appeal of megachurches like Schuller's was simple—they validated and encouraged a powerful trifecta of material success, personal growth and fulfillment, and political conservatism.<sup>22</sup>

Missing here is any talk of our challenging Savior and his call to tend to the poor. Where is an experience of God other than that evidenced by material blessing? In an increasingly economically divided culture, a message of wealth as a sign of God's response to our faithfulness will carry little allure for Millennials and those who work on

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<sup>22</sup> Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 26.

behalf of the marginalized. What is missing is a witness to Jesus' mandate to be in the world as he was in the world.

The question of personal morality—lauded by WCA and its religious adherents—has grown wearisome even as their focus seems to be distilled down to a narrow few areas of life: primarily sex, marriage (as linked to sex), and reproductive justice.

Jones suggests the results of Schuler's and his followers' message:

Although Americans who have disaffiliated from the childhood faith give a variety of reasons for leaving, a number of studies have found that negative religious teachings about gay and lesbian people and relationships—that they are sinful, immoral, or perverse—are one of the significant factors driving younger Americans to abandon traditional religious institutions.<sup>23</sup>

Jones goes on:

In 'UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity,' David Kinnaman, the president of the evangelical polling firm, the Barna Group, analyzed the results of a 2006 survey among a random sample of 16- to 29-year-olds. The study found that the top three attributes young Americans associated with "present-day Christianity" were being antigay (91 percent), judgmental (87 percent), and hypocritical (85 percent)... "Christianity has an image problem among American youth."<sup>24</sup> There is yet another aspect of being church that makes it more challenging for us to simply compete as another option for belonging. Most congregations are not clear on our "dues," what perks are available to members, and what is required to belong. We live in a consumer culture and people are accustomed to using language about return on investment, membership benefits, and just exactly what everything costs. In an effort to

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 131-132.

be welcoming, most congregations allow people to determine their own financial and talent contributions. As a result, we tend to ask too little and leave people confused about “what membership costs.”<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, we are in need of what could be described as an awakening. Certainly this is reflected in the work of many well respected theologians and commentators. But I am speaking less of a broad, national, or even global awakening. Within the context of this work, I am thinking about a congregational or denominational awakening. Bass describes an awakening that is possible at a variety of levels.

Awakenings are movements of cultural revitalization that “eventuate in basic restructurings of our institutions and redefinitions of our social goals.” As McLoughlin writes, “Revivals and awakenings occur in all cultures. They are essentially folk movements, the means by which a people or nation reshapes its identity, transforms patterns of thought and action, and sustains a healthy relationships with environmental and social change. Awakenings begin when old systems break down in “periods of cultural distortion and grave personal stress, when we lose faith in the legitimacy of our norms, the viability of our institutions, and the authority of leaders in church and state.” A “critical disjunction” in how we perceive ourselves, God, and the world arises from the stress. The end of the old opens the way for the new.”<sup>26</sup>

I wouldn’t claim that one woman preaching to one congregation in one town (or even three) can effect an awakening. But the church will not awaken if we lose our

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<sup>25</sup> A few years ago, an elderly gentleman transferred his church membership from another Lutheran church in the next suburb. He asked me how much he should be giving. I said that he was welcome to give whatever amount felt faithful to him; that we didn’t set amounts for people. He asked me again: “Really, how much should I give? I haven’t been given a pledge card!” (We had stopped asking for pledges three years earlier.) He was so persistent I finally said, “Well, I like to think about giving in terms of percentages. So, unless you are already a tither perhaps you could begin with 3 percent of your income and increase it each year.” He went away satisfied. I mention him because if our own lifelong participants aren’t clear about “what membership costs,” how can we expect those who are new to church to understand?

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 29.

primary witness to the gospel. . .a witness powerful enough to transform, reform, remake, and awaken culture. It is awakening the witness of members of the congregation that I am inspired to focus on. With the aid of the Holy Spirit, my hope is to pursue an awakening of the disciple within us who is eager to follow the lead of the Samaritan woman and say to our neighbors, “Come and see!”

## CHAPTER 2

### BIBLICAL/THEOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

In spite of a clear biblical call to witness, there seem to be three things that get in the way of the average person bearing witness to or telling their own story of their experience(s) with God:

- A belief that they must have a particular depth of biblical and theological knowledge or insight in order to be credible.
- A belief that they don't possess the right language or vocabulary to be effective, which may include the presupposition that one must be effective in a particular way for witness to be worthwhile.
- A belief that one should be able to explain or justify one's experience before sharing it. Lacking the ability to provide such a justification, people not only become hesitant to share their story but can also begin to doubt it themselves.

These beliefs or insecurities are not held by all professing Christians, nor are they the only roadblocks people face, but they seem to be common among reluctant witnesses. The good news for the church, the gospel, and potential witnesses is that the Bible offers a more hopeful perspective on "inadequate" witnesses.

First among those seemingly “inadequate” witnesses is the Samaritan woman in John 4 whom Karoline Lewis describes as “an unexpected witness”.<sup>1</sup> She begins her conversation with Jesus with the query: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria” (4:9)? According to Lewis “she names every boundary that has been crossed”, highlighting the unlikelihood of this particular encounter.<sup>2</sup> After which the woman goes into the city where she bears witness with a question rather than a statement: “He cannot be the Messiah, can he” (4:29)? In spite of her perceived limits, she was willing to witness to her own encounter with God, even as she named her own uncertainty and the whole town shows up at the well to see!

The Samaritan is the embodiment of the kind of witness this project aspires to create. She makes no assumptions about her worth and the possibility of a holy encounter in her life, she has no special learning or language, she isn’t perceived among her own people to be a prophet or teacher. She is simply a person who had an experience that she believed might be of God and she told what she knew. It is the simplicity, authenticity and open question in her witness that stirred up enough curiosity in her hearers that they made a decision to come and see.

As a preacher, in her story we get a glimmer of what is necessary in preaching to create witness. Our hearers need to gather enough of the God story of which they are a part to be able to tease out and discern what might be an encounter with God; just as she knows her own faith history, which gave her the capacity to engage Jesus with some curiosity. Then the work is hers to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Karoline M. Lewis, *John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 52 .

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 57.

### Bear Witness to What We Have Seen

In Luke 7:18-35, John's disciples come to Jesus with John's question: "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"<sup>3</sup> This is a huge messianic query. But Jesus doesn't answer them as we might expect. Jesus doesn't answer yes or no, nor does Jesus justify himself. Jesus simply tells them to go tell John what they have seen. Jesus sends them to tell of what they have heard and *experienced*.

Jesus doesn't send John's disciples back with verifiable explanations and a fully developed doctrine of messianic salvation. Jesus sends them back *to bear witness to their own lived experience* of Jesus: "Go and tell John what *you have seen and heard*; the blind have received their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Luke 7:22).<sup>4</sup>

Jesus doesn't ask people to make the case for or even to understand what they have seen. John's disciples are simply exhorted to tell about their own lived experience.

On the first Easter, Mary doesn't tell the disciples that Jesus is raised. She doesn't make a case for her witness to be legitimized by what Jesus had forecast. She simply tells what she experienced: "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:11-18). Sharing the experience of what they have seen, both women prepare others for their own subsequent encounter with Jesus.

When Jesus heals the Gerasene demoniac, the swineherds run off and tell what they saw "in the city and in the country. Then the people came to see what it was that had

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Scripture will be from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis mine.

happened” (Mark 5:14). When the healed man wants to follow Jesus, Jesus instructs him instead to go tell his friends “how much the Lord has done” for him (Mark 5: 19). Jesus doesn’t require, or expect, that the man include theological, cosmic, or medical explanations for his healing. Simply telling what he has experienced is sufficient.

The biblical “witness” is the most powerful argument for our own. Throughout the early church, regular folks simply and boldly told their story. Indeed, Peter and John were more effective once people realized that they were, in fact, “uneducated and ordinary men” (Acts 4:13).

Based on a survey of the biblical witness, the work of the preacher in shaping modern witnesses can be to empower and equip people to do no more and no less than tell what they have seen, heard, felt, tasted, and smelled. They need not fully understand it or explain why it is “true.” They simply identify something they have experienced that feels to them as if it might be of God and then tell that story. “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

When our daughter was in third grade, she was diagnosed with Tourette’s Syndrome. By fourth grade, the symptoms were completely gone. She is now 28 and continues to be symptom-free. Because there is no lab test to confirm whether or not someone has Tourette’s (it is a symptom-based diagnosis and there is no cure), we cannot definitively say what happened medically. What we do know is that she was covered by the prayers of family and friends and the prayer chains of multiple congregations. When she achieved symptom-free status, I was hesitant to call it a “God thing.” I didn’t dare attribute the healing to God because of that lack of definitive medical confirmation. A



friend said, “Just claim it for God, Chris. You don’t have to understand it or explain it.” So now when I tell the story, I say, “I don’t know for sure, but this is what happened. . .”

Because the church is more than a club, because it is our charge as Christians to bring the good news into the world, the most effective way for us to tell our uncertain, hopeful stories is to do just as so many models in scripture do: Share what we have experienced and invite the curious to join their questions with ours. “He couldn’t be the Messiah, could he?”

And we *are* charged by the biblical witness to bring the good news to the world. Jesus himself tells us, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus gives no prescription about how to do it, other than to tell what we have seen and heard.

Subsequent to Jesus, even our earliest Christian theologian could only bear witness to what he experienced. Paul models the desire to connect his own experience with those of the hopeful in the opening of his letter to Rome: “For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Romans 1:11-12).

Rather than a fully developed theological argument, a personal story, told simply for the sake of sharing the hope that is within in us, is a word of hope and encouragement to those who hear it. I have often heard people respond to someone telling of their experience with God with something like: “I am still not sure what *I* think, but your words helped. Thank you.”

## Who We Are and Who We Tell

Paul writes to the church at Corinth:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and *entrusting the message of reconciliation to us*. So we are ambassadors for Christ. . . (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).<sup>5</sup>

It is astonishing to me that we are entrusted with such a powerful word. The very fact that sinful and imperfect human beings have been entrusted with God's Word is assurance that human imperfection is capable of bearing such good news. The one *perfect* vessel, Jesus Christ, produced in us who are *imperfect* all that is necessary to be witnesses to God's activity in the world. Of course our words are going to be imperfect. Even those who are called by the church to preach must acknowledge that the words we utter are imperfect. And so we strive to carry this message of reconciliation to others in ways that are authentic, honest, and faithful.

We are exhorted to not let our imperfections get in the way: "Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace" (2 Timothy 1:8-9). We are invited to boldly give testimony as we understand it, without shame or abnegation of our own limited understanding. We trust that God works in our faithful imperfection and inarticulate attempts.

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<sup>5</sup> Emphasis mine.

Ultimately, we can only be obedient, imperfect witnesses. We cannot hope to achieve some sort of evangelical perfection in this life. Were that the expectation, most pastors would never dare step into the pulpit week after week—or at least *shouldn't* dare.

Additionally, we bear witness *as we are* to the people we know, within the context of relationships. “. . .let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God has called you” (1 Corinthians 7:17). Paul makes this statement in the context of a discussion about honoring our primary relationships, because in those relationships the believer may bless the unbeliever. Our most powerful and likely most effective witness will generally come in the context of existing relationships.

In his D.Min. dissertation, Earl Bland makes a case for *personal* witness for the sake of evangelism, church growth, and dissemination of the gospel:

. . .the church today proclaims to a people who have not been witnesses to the event of Christ. And, since the church is not a perfect witness. . .the world sees a distorted image of Christ at worst, and they see only glimpses of God at best. We are proclaiming Jesus to individuals who have not directly seen and experienced perfectly His love and grace, or His power. This makes the need for a personal witness even more great than during the first century. The church must be filled with those who have truthfully experienced God's love and experienced the person of Jesus Christ in a way that can be shared with others.<sup>6</sup>

While I agree with Bland about the importance of a personal witness, we cannot prove that someone has “truthfully experienced God's love and. . .the person of Jesus Christ.” The only measure is their story, and the best witness is their language. Ward and Trobisch underscore this:

The study of performance traditions and values within the culture that surrounded the earliest Christian communities expands our understanding of how Christians

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<sup>6</sup> Earl Anvern Bland, “Preaching to Encourage Lay Witnessing,” Columbia Theological Seminary, 1992, 43.

communicated their experience of God in Christ to each other. They developed distinctive ways of putting that experience into words, using the conventions of public speaking that were available to them. There was urgency in this effort then just as there is today—to speak in ways that are comprehensible both to each other and to the culture at large. Their creativity and interpretive insights guide our own expression. . . .<sup>7</sup>

We tell *our* story of *our* experience of God because we are instructed by Jesus to do so, because *our* story is the only one we know intimately enough to share credibly and because people are hungry for a story of God—or at least of the ineffable—that can inform, confirm, or come alongside their own experience or curiosity.

The congregation I currently serve has been through considerable conflict over the past decades. Understandably, some members have left. What surprises me is not that people leave, but that so many people stay. This is true across congregations and denominations based on conversations I have had with leaders and members of varieties of congregations. In spite of boundary violations, theft or misuse of power, in spite of pastors who are poor preachers, in spite of staff members with poor interpersonal skills or work ethics, in spite of contentious annual meetings and stressed budgets: people stay and listen to sermons, participate in Bible studies, serve coffee on Sunday mornings, and so on. It is my observation that their interpersonal relationships within the congregation are the main reason they stay in such circumstances.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John we see underscored the importance of human relationship in bearing witness and building community of faith. Andrew finds Simon and says, “We have found the Messiah!” Philip finds Nathanael and says, “We have found him.” Each “speaking to one another,” telling what they have seen and heard

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<sup>7</sup> Richard F. Ward and David J Trobisch, *Bringing the Word to Life: Engaging the New Testament through Performing It* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 33.

to those with whom they already share company. These passages underscore the centrality of relationship to community in Christ: relationship with God and relationship with one another. Some of those relationships will be the most intimate and enduring some people will ever experience. And no amount of pastoral or budgetary shenanigans will ever make some of us walk away from those relationships.

### **In Our Own Words**

The sinew of our relationships is the *imago dei*. We have been crafted in the image of God, designed for community and relationship. Science has demonstrated the destructive effects of neglect and isolation on otherwise social creatures. Human beings are innately social, relational, and conversational.

Craddock reflects on the importance of words:

The survival of the habit [attending Sunday morning worship] can be partially accounted for by the nourishment it receives from *a subterranean hope: perhaps today there will be a word from God*.<sup>8</sup> This is a hope born of faith in a God made known through words. In a time when many speak of “mere words” so pejoratively, it may seem almost incredible that “words” would be a means of God’s giving Godself to us. But over against this disregard for words is in our time a gathering of concerns and explorations into the meaning of language that has no equal in the history of our civilization. The simple and yet profound act of speaking to one another has become the center for a whole constellation of studies philosophical, theological, biblical, psychological, and practical.<sup>9</sup>

We connect, learn, and build relationships through language. Spoken, signed, or scrawled, we connect through words or symbols that stand in for words.

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<sup>8</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>9</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 22.

When I was young, I read the remarkable story of Helen Keller and her teacher Anne Sullivan. Helen was a wild and unruly young girl. Blind and deaf, she was disconnected from the people around her in seemingly insurmountable ways. Ms. Sullivan patiently worked to help Helen understand words through a signed language, by “speaking” into her hands. It was arduous work. When, at last, she made the connection, Helen suddenly understood what Ms. Sullivan was doing: She was communicating to Helen through signs that the cold, wet stuff pouring over her hands was “water.” In the version of the story that I read, Helen grabbed Ms. Sullivan’s hand and rushed her to thing after thing, demanding to know the words. She devoured them as fast as Ms. Sullivan could physically “speak” them.

Being connected by language and by words changed Helen Keller’s life, just as being connected by language changed the lives of Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, and Nathanael. Like Helen Keller, the disciples had been looking for a word. And upon finding the Word, their lives were forever changed. Because human beings are built to connect and to communicate, it is no small thing that Jesus comes to us as the Word of God, speaking to us in a new way. After generations of words, some obeyed and passed on, others disregarded, God continued to speak, patiently spelling into our lives word after word—until at last we “hear” this Word.

God speaks into the place created in us that hungers for God, that place where hope dwells. Are we who hope in this God not compelled to take that life-changing Word and, using whatever language we know, *spell it* into the lives of those who have not yet heard it?

### **The Only Justification is Christ**

For better or worse, words help define who we are. I can describe myself by relationship words (wife, mother, friend), by belonging words (Christian, Lutheran, American), by descriptive words (female, greying, white). As I introduce myself and as I tell my stories, I continue to better determine and discover who I am. I remember the awkward thrill of introducing myself at a work gathering as Ted's *wife* for the first time. Claiming that word for myself helped me live into what it meant to me to be a wife.

We who claim to be or strive to be Jesus' disciples must learn to speak about God in order to clarify our own identity as disciples. And we speak to gain clarity about the Christ to whom we cleave and to the particular brand of faith to which we ascribe. This is not the same thing as being able to quote chapter and verse or make profound theological proclamations. The necessity for putting words to our proclamation is to make a claim about who we think God is and who we are in relationship to God and, within that claim, to come to greater understanding about ourselves and our God.

Richard Lischer, speaking to preachers, could just as well be speaking to disciples bearing witness:

We preach in order to communicate the distinctiveness of the Christian message in a world of counter-messages and conflicting values. In an era of wide-open pluralism, Christians must know who they are in the marketplace of religions and spiritualities. We must separate our own story from the stories of the world and learn to live by our own script. In short, we preach to solidify our own identity.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*.

Tom Long, similarly speaking to preachers, speaks to how the stories we choose to tell say something about what we believe: “. . .when we include a ‘slice of life’ in a sermon, we are making implicit theological claims whether we know it or not.”<sup>11</sup>

Nicodemus sought out Jesus to better understand just who Jesus is. Saul asks, “Who are you, Lord?” as he lay stunned on the Damascus road. As Nicodemus and Saul grow to understand who Jesus is, they grow to understand who they are in relationship to Jesus. Saul is a remarkable example of professing who he is based on a certain set of assumptions about who Jesus is, and then, upon learning something new about Jesus, altering his witness and ultimately his self-understanding and identity profoundly.

Religious leaders and the hopeful in both the Old and New Testaments ask: Who are you? Who is this God? People want to know, and someone must tell them. By telling them, we invite them into a new self-discovery of who they are in relation to God.

While witness does not require an extraordinary theological, anthropological, or sociological mind, it does require that we tell our own story as we understand it. And while our fear of being unable to “justify” our experience may cause us to stay silent, telling our story both effects and requires a sense of our own identity. Telling our story helps shape profoundly what we understand about Christ and who we are in relationship to Christ.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 157.



### From Where Does Our Help Come?

Our own story requires only authenticity and the truth—and yet we remain reluctant. So we return to the biblical models of witness for words of reassurance for the reluctant witness and, in the interest of the truth, words of challenge.

In the Old Testament, the prophets, while certainly not the models, are the clearest models for witness. It is likely to be overwhelming to any erstwhile witness to be expected to behave as a prophet! But it may be reassuring to recall that prophets are often, although not always, called to speak to their own communities. They know the people to whom they are speaking—if not personally, then at least culturally and socially. They are fluent in the language that will be most effectively understood by the people to whom they have been called to speak.

The prophets are also given words to use.

Then the Lord said to Isaiah, “Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to Fuller’s Field, *and say to him, Take heed, be quiet, do not fear. . .*” (Isaiah 7:3-4).<sup>12</sup>

But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and *you shall speak whatever I command you*. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now *I have put my words in your mouth.*” (Jeremiah 1:9).<sup>13</sup>

Modern Christians seem to be of two minds on whether we have or will be given the words to speak to others about our experience of God or even about our faith. Most Lutherans with whom I have spoken will say they don’t know what to say. My Evangelical Christian friends are more confident. My dear cousin John is supremely

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<sup>12</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> Emphasis mine.

confident that the Lord has or will give him the language he needs when the time comes. John also operates out of a theology of conversion (this will be addressed later in this thesis). He expects to convert non-Christians to Christianity through witness and prayer, sometimes in a single encounter.

Rather than setting conversion as the primary aim, what I am striving for is witness that becomes an invitation to take a closer look. I tell you of my experience in such a way that you wonder if you can have or have had such an experience, or you long for a similar experience, or you are simply curious and you choose to connect—however informally—to a Christian community to find out. While conversion is a welcome outcome, most of the people to whom I preach are such reluctant witnesses that such an outcome is unlikely in a single encounter.

Even for those whose aim is short of full conversion, the worry about being provided language for telling our story is given balm by the witness of scripture. I will say more about this later.

Both models—more immediate conversion and invitation into a community of discovery—find support in the early church. Peter gave such a compelling witness on the festival of Pentecost that “three thousand persons were added” (Acts 2:41). But the witness of the community also resulted in baptisms over the long term, as “day by day the Lord added to their number” (Acts 2:47).

What is compelling about the later verse is that it underscores the power of the community of faith. If we can, by our own story, welcome someone into the community, then the community becomes the next witness. A community centered on core faith commitments and the resulting behaviors of worship, prayer, learning, and service can

take up the task of witnessing to the newcomer in various and powerful ways. Then belonging becomes something more than doing good in the world and paying dues.

We profess that wherever two or more are gathered in the name of Christ, Christ is present (Matthew 18:20). Therefore the witness of the community bears the Word of God in its practice, profession, and confession. The Word is the authentic story of the Christian faith community. And ultimately, it is the encounter with that Word, that story, which leads to transformation or conversion.

Paul Ricoeur speaks to this in his essay “The Hermeneutics of Testimony.” He is reflecting on Israel’s (community) call to be Yahweh’s witnesses in Isaiah 43:8-13.

At first the witness is not just anyone who comes forward and gives testimony, but the one who is sent in order to testify. Originally, testimony comes from somewhere else. Next, the witness does not testify about isolated and contingent fact but about the radical, global meaning of human experience. It is Yahweh himself who is witnessed to in the testimony. Moreover, the testimony is oriented toward proclamation, divulging, propagation: it is for all people that one people is witness. Finally, this profession implies a total engagement not only of words but of act and, in the extreme, in the sacrifice of a life. . . .the testimony does not belong to the witness. It proceeds from an absolute initiative as to its origin and its content.<sup>14</sup>

One could argue from Ricoeur’s comments that the single witness is not to be desired unless particularly called for. I am far more interested in witness as an invitation to community than as striving to effect a single personal conversion that may or may not result in connection to community. So I focus on Ricoeur’s argument that it is Yahweh or Godself who witnesses through the community. It is in our collective witness that the experience of God is available to all people. Having been created in *imago dei*, we are designed for community. When one person tells their story, they are, in effect, witnessing

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<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony.”

to the universal possibility of an experience of God. Further, an experience of God increases in likelihood as we are connected to a witnessing community.

I previously mentioned that we find both promise and challenge in the biblical call to witness. One of the *challenges* for Christian witness is trusting that we, like the prophets, will be given language—or words—when needed. We have assurance from Jesus that words will be provided as we need it: “do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say” (Luke 12:11-12). But, as the thesis writer, I am curious to know how many modern Lutheran Christians believe or trust this.

It has been my experience and my observation that Lutherans struggle a bit with trusting that the Holy Spirit can make anything happen in our lives, much less in our conversational encounters. However, I would argue that the best likelihood we have of the Holy Spirit acting in our lives is when we are most authentically the person God created us to be, using the inspired skills and language that are native to us and the experiences that are our own. Authenticity is at the heart of relationship and certainly at the heart of effective witness. We can only tell what we believe we have experienced using the words we know. Again, Ricoeur:

A theology of testimony which is not just another name for the theology of the confession of faith is only possible if a certain narrative kernel is preserved in strict union with the confession of faith. The case par excellence is the faith of Israel which, at first, confessed Yahweh by relating the facts of deliverance which punctuate the history of its liberation. . . . Where a “history” of liberation can be related, a prophetic “meaning” can be not only confessed but attested. It is not possible to testify *for* meaning without testifying *that* something has happened which signifies meaning.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 133.

I am uncertain whether I am *fully* aligned with Ricoeur. I don't disagree with him; I am simply not confident that I understand him. But I do believe he is saying that a confession of faith and witness are necessarily linked because a confession of faith is connected to events that happened. For example, he uses God's instruction to Israel in Deuteronomy 26:5-9 as an example of testimony to events that is also confession of faith. Using my own example of our daughter, when I tell the story of something that *happened*, I am making a confession of faith.

In John 4, after encountering Jesus, the Samaritan woman at the well goes into town. While some have said she is being sarcastic, I prefer the reading of this story that suggests she is testifying to what she saw, to what happened. Even in her question she is making a hesitant, incomplete confession of faith. When we tell a story of an experience of God, we are in effect telling what we believe or hope about God. "This happened. It cannot be God, can it? Because I hope it is. I think it is. It sure sounds, looks, tastes like the God that I believe/long to believe in."

Ultimately, there is no reason workaday Christians cannot or should not bear witness to their own experiences of God. This is especially true in the United States, where death and imprisonment as a result of bearing witness to our faith are rare to nonexistent. Even persecution that jeopardizes our life and livelihood is rare.

Even our own limitations, perceived or otherwise, are no reason to remain silent. Moses was not a public speaker. Paul had some sort of obvious infirmity. Women were considered deceptive or not believable. And yet, there are examples throughout scripture of people speaking the truth as they understand it, in spite of such apparent obstacles. As

a result, God's vision was moved forward and/or new people were able to identify and experience God and come to faith. This is the witness to which we are called.

Some prophets, like Moses, were sent to new places to bear witness to what God was up to. Amos was called from the southern kingdom to prophecy in the north as an outsider. The disciples traveled to distant places to witness to people they did not know. The long history of Christian mission is linked to this tradition. In spite of the perceived comfort of most often being called to bear witness within existing relationships, I have heard plenty of stories from those who find it easier to talk about issues of faith with strangers or people they won't see again.

For the sake of this project, I am interested primarily in an individual's capacity to witness, or tell their own story, to those whom they naturally encounter: members of their family, coworkers, the person on the beach chair next to them. This project is not so much "get in a sail boat, go to a foreign land, and tell" as it is, simply, "tell."

The hope of this project is that we will speak to our "children and talk about [God and God's faithfulness] when we are at home and when we are away, when we lie down and when we rise" (Deuteronomy 6:7), wherever we may find ourselves: at the gym, on the soccer sidelines, in the checkout lane, or at a dinner party.

In summary, the Bible is clear that Christian disciples are called to bear witness to the God we know in Christ and through the lens of the Gospel. We are equipped with our own experiences and native language to speak to those we encounter daily. Furthermore, we are part of the Body of Christ. Therefore the work of witness does not rest on us as individuals alone. We tell our story authentically, inviting the hearer to bring their curiosity and questions alongside our own. Perhaps they are curious enough to "come and

see” what the gathered community of faithful is up to and to discover more about this God to whom we clumsily bear witness. Then the role of witness becomes the shared work of the gathered body.

The role of the preacher becomes one of model, encourager, and exhorter. Can we model telling our own story of our own experiences in our own language? Can we support and encourage normally reluctant witness to trust God to supply them with the simple language to tell their story? And can we exhort them to respond in obedience to the biblical call to be witness to the God we know in Christ.

Again, Lischer:

“We preach in order to communicate the distinctiveness of the Christian message in a world of counter-messages and conflicting values. . . We must separate our own story from the stories of the world and learn to live by our own script. In short, we preach to solidify our own identity.”<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, the preacher is a witness among witnesses, telling not only our own story, but the story we have been charged with telling. As a result the preacher, the member, and the congregation become clearer about who we are and what we are created by God to do for the sake of the Gospel in the world.

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<sup>16</sup> Lischer, Richard, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*.

CHAPTER 3  
LITERATURE REVIEW

**Theses**

The majority of the theses and dissertations reflected here are for the Doctor of Ministry Degree in Biblical Preaching. One is for a degree in Congregational Mission and Leadership.

Christine Wright explored the incorporation of the preacher's personal testimony into the sermon as an effective way to clearly communicate the Gospel. She professes a theology of salvation urgency because "the time will come; which has not been revealed to the world, in which this appointed time for the lost to receive salvation will cease."<sup>1</sup>

While I don't share her theology of salvation urgency and patently disagree that the door to salvation will close, I agree that there is urgency to spreading the Gospel. People are experiencing an increasingly pluralistic world. At the same time, suspicion and uncertainty are being fomented in the current political environment in the United States. The urgency of the Gospel is the message of God's expansive and inclusive love and grace and our freedom to trust that God holds the future. Therefore, we can let go of concerns about our own capacity to effect salvation for our own sake, whether we

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Wright, "Spreading the Gospel through Testimonial Preaching," Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2007, 2.



understand salvation to be a theological or existential aim. Thus, I maintain, the real urgency is not one of salvation but one of liberation.

In her thesis, Wright does a survey of the Old *and* New Testament demonstrating that the people of God are called by God to be “his” witnesses (pronoun choice hers). She included a long list of “Biblical Examples of Old Testament and New Testament Witnesses” which I found to be particularly helpful for my own work.<sup>2</sup>

Her project was to create a 28-hour class to teach people both the “urgency to spread the Gospel” and to do it by incorporating personal testimony/faith stories. She focused primarily on the role of the preacher’s own testimony as part of the sermon because: “(1) It is an evangelical ministry to unbelievers; (2) it is a strengthening ministry to Christians; and (3) it is an [sic] unifying ministry in an ecumenical age.”<sup>3</sup>

Earl Anvern Bland’s work focused on “creating a biblical model for faith sharing which would be effective in the Cameroonian Presbyterian Church.”<sup>4</sup> He stated: The “purpose of this project is to encourage and even produce believers who are willing and unashamed to share what they know about God in their life.”<sup>5</sup> This is aligned with my hopes for my project.

Too often the people I speak with are dismayed after having been told that the only proper witness must be their adult conversion story. Many lifelong church goers

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Earl Anvern Bland, “Preaching to Encourage Lay Witnessing.”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 7.

have experienced epiphanies but many have not experienced a “no-faith” to “now-faith” conversion. Bland addresses this concern and reflects my own perspective.

. . .there is more to sharing a personal testimony than simply sharing a conversion account. I believe Christians have many experiences of the divine, and these accounts become the true witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ in the modern world. I am therefore convinced that this church and the rest of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. could benefit greatly from a renewed interest and expression of the personal experiences of God working among us and in us. These accounts need to be shared more openly and consistently among Presbyterians. To practice this, [sic] would further edify the flock and eventually bring others into the fold. Faith sharing is not only sharing the Good News, but the Good News as it has entered our personal lives.<sup>6</sup>

Bland also comments on the less appealing models of witness that discourage would-be witnesses with their aggressive, goal-oriented conversion strategies. He mentions the traditions that press for a decision—including praying “the sinner’s prayer”—and remarks that Jesus “didn’t always press for a decision” (Mark 12:28-34).<sup>7</sup>

Bland did much of what I hoped to do by creating a series of sermons that “will challenge them and inform them of the need and ways to share personal faith in God.”<sup>8</sup> Bland points out that one challenge faced by the preacher is that the hearers often struggle with a fear of rejection and inadequacy when called to witness. This resonates as I reflect on Suzanne. She simply did not *believe* she had the capacity or the language to do more than share the social benefits of church membership, when in reality she probably already had both language and capacity. She needed to be shown how to use them.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., vi.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Bland also speaks to the idea that the church is not alone in doing good in the world and doing good is not the same thing as sharing faith—as referenced by Hout: “. . .doing good works is not witnessing. Even wonderful, loving deeds are nebulous in their meaning when no clear voice is heard to point to the Christ from which the motive and love comes. They are a witness to the witness.”<sup>9</sup>

Bland and I diverge when he speaks of the necessity of *a response* to God. While we agree that one’s witness is more than one’s personal conversion story, he holds that the *goal* of witness is, in fact, conversion. From my perspective, the goal of witness is an invitation to be curious, to come and see, and to learn more, and leave in the hands of the Spirit whether or not conversion will take place. This also allows for the community to be part of the witness and acknowledges that ultimately faith is a gift of the Spirit and conversion of the heart and/or life is an act of God. I suspect that Bland would agree that conversion is the work of the Spirit. The difference is in his emphasis on the priority of conversion as the goal of witness.

Bland also suggests that we limit our witness to *that which we believe*.<sup>10</sup> Again, I am mindful of the woman at the well whose testimony was in the form of question “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” She bears witness to her lived experience and invites her hearers to inhabit her questions with her. She was only sure of what she experienced. She was not yet sure about what she believed about that experience.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 19.

From my experience as a parish pastor, I see this as a common limitation in witness. People often think they first need to understand their experience or what they believe about that experience before they can share it. My argument is that belief or lack thereof need not be an obstacle to sharing one's story. Quite to the contrary, a powerful witness can begin with, "Call me crazy, but this happened." This frankness, and even lack of certainty, creates an invitational space for other uncertain people to enter with equally frank curiosity.

Ronald Marriott did a project using six sermons from Luke-Acts<sup>11</sup> to shape a six-sermon series motivating people for personal evangelism. While he doesn't speak to the same salvation "urgency" as Wright, he does believe that "Christians are in a battle for peoples' souls."<sup>12</sup> He utilized an eleven-person control group that took a pre-test and post-test, listened to a six-week sermon series on the importance of sharing one's faith, and participated in an online chat room and a six-week action plan.<sup>13</sup> The control group participants each selected a target person upon which to practice the action steps.

I envy him the control group. I intended to include one in my project but was unable to secure participation in the time frame necessary due to moving to a new congregation in the middle of my doctoral work.

Like Wright, Marriott's theology doesn't quite align with my Lutheran way of thinking about salvation and evangelism. Marriott persisted in describing all those outside

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<sup>11</sup> John 3:7-14; Luke 10:1-24; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 2:14-40; Acts 7:51-60 and Acts 13:13-52.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Wayne Marriott, "Motivating Christians Toward Personal Evangelism Through Preaching from Selected Passages in Luke and Acts," Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 7-8.

the church as “lost.” There was one reference to a control group member who chose a “Catholic” as their target “lost” person. There is an inclination among certain Christians to consider Catholics non-Christians and in need of salvation, an idea which I find offensive, having grown up Catholic notwithstanding. Fortunately, Marriott didn’t dwell on it so neither shall I.

Marriott also maintains that it is the responsibility of every Christian to evangelize according to the “scriptural plan” for salvation. He has a long discussion of the importance of using Scripture to evangelize the lost, at the least to understand that we know we must evangelize the lost because of the witness of Scripture.<sup>14</sup> Citing Romans 10:13-17, he says, “According to these verses, for people to believe in God for salvation without hearing the truth of God’s Word is impossible. Although people can believe God exists without the benefit of reading or hearing Scripture, God will not save them unless they hear and receive the Gospel message.”<sup>15</sup>

While I believe—consistent with Lutheran theology—that God’s Word has the power to act in the lives of the hearer, I don’t support the idea that salvation cannot come outside the explicit, *biblical* word of God. I do, however, align with him in the belief that the Bible is our most powerful witness and source of understanding about God.

Ronald Marriott in his thesis talks about Jesus as the perfect human who “professed that he was the Son of God sent to die as the sacrificial lamb in order to take away the sins of the world.”<sup>16</sup> His theology includes the belief that one must “accept the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 28-30.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 17.

gift of salvation before it can be effective in that person's life."<sup>17</sup> "Therefore, if personal acceptance is necessary for the completion of salvation in a person's life, Christians must be diligent in informing people of their responsibility in atonement."<sup>18</sup>

While I don't hold the same purpose in witness as he does in evangelism, he did challenge me to think more carefully about my theology of witness and the reasons why I believe it's important for Christians tell their stories. That sent me back to Chapter Two of this thesis with more consideration.

As I mentioned before, Marriott believes it is the responsibility of every Christian to participate in evangelism for the purpose of leading the "lost" through the plan of salvation put forth by Scripture. He and his members believe, like Lutherans do, that the power to change hearts comes through the Holy Spirit. This comes up in a chat room conversation with his control group.

However, Marriot goes so far as to state that when people receive the Holy Spirit, *all* are commissioned to be witnesses.<sup>19</sup> The biblical witness doesn't entirely support this as 1 Corinthians, Romans, and Ephesians illustrate the diversity of Spirit-given gifts (Among these New Testament letters only Ephesians adds evangelists to the list of gifts). Yes, these gifts are all given for the building up of the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12) but that could be interpreted as the Body each sharing their gifts for the *good* of the *Body*, not necessarily for *growing* the Body. The theology of vocation would argue that living

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 46.

out our Spirit-given gifts, whatever those gifts may be, is the witness through which God can work. Evangelist or no.

I run the risk of contradicting myself. My project is to lift up the importance of sharing one's own experience of God. And we do this because there is a hungry, aching world in need of belonging, love, and acceptance as only God can provide. But Marriott's focus is evangelism to save individual souls from the very real possibility of eternal damnation. Again, I maintain the good news is not simply a word of future salvation but a word of liberation from the limits and hurts of this life.

In her thesis for Congregational Mission and Leadership, Donna Simon explores a similar goal to mine but does it using practices other than preaching. Her goal could be mine: "At the end of this project I wanted to be able to declare that City of God Lutheran Church is a witnessing community, pointing to the goodness of God's presence in the world."<sup>20</sup>

She reflects on an experience she had as a child going out with adults to witness to "lapsed members of their church. The adults on the team talked about scripture, church, and Jesus. There were invitations to recommit to Christ, and to take Jesus as savior—an invitation to personal conversion."<sup>21</sup> She found this kind of witness to be hollow, "individuated (and therefore not relational) at best and coercive at worst."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Donna Simon, "More God: How Practicing Incarnation Can Shape a Witnessing Community," Luther Seminary, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 76-77.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Simon uses what she calls incarnational practices<sup>23</sup> to accomplish her goals.

Among those practices were

- “Conversation during worship about how we have encountered/will encounter God.”
- “Imagining ourselves in into the Passion story.”
- “Sermon Series and Sunday School Class on Communion and Incarnation.”
- Additional practices, including what she called “Sojourning practices” such as bus rides with our without specific destinations.<sup>24</sup>

Simon’s congregation’s starting point is different than mine. I cannot say yet with certainty what she says: “Members of our church community are aware of the ways that God is active in the world around them, and they seek to join in God’s mission in our parish and the wider community.”<sup>25</sup> Members of my congregation are certainly engaged in service in the community, but for the most part they don’t articulate that they understand themselves to be aligned with God’s mission.

The most helpful thesis for me was that of Phil Waite, “Preaching as a Catalyst for Testimony in a Post-Mennonite Context.” His quest was similar to mine except that his focus was on the largely Mennonite communities that had been profoundly shaped by the congregations at their center, creating Mennonite culture outside the church proper. While Mennonites do not ascribe to the concept of Christian America, their communities took particular form due to the “theological and spiritual commitments of the church. The

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 76-77.



link between church and culture has become tenuous for them. There is a distinct decline in Mennonite ‘culture’ which is having an impact on the vitality of the congregations.”<sup>26</sup>

He not only resonates with the intention of my project but with what I might have chosen as an alternate project when he writes:

Rather than trying to shape preaching that engages the new Moundridge, I want to shape preaching that helps the church be the church in this place, so that it might fulfill its mission in the world. I have come to believe we share a more compelling Gospel when we are faithful to our peculiar way of being in the world, than when we try to satisfy the spiritual wants and desires of the consumer culture around us. To fulfill its mission in our community and in the world, the church needs to be a community of testimony, consciously giving voice in its distinct language, and through its peculiar behavior, to God’s story.<sup>27</sup>

Rereading this brings something to the surface for me. My predecessor was focused on building a community church where all are welcome, regardless of where they are on their faith journey, to the point of diluting the Lutheran identity, theology, and worship styles (I say more on this in chapter four). There was an emphasis on not offending anyone, which apparently meant no longer using “old” tunes, the hymnal, or the organ, as they were perceived to be too Lutheran. The challenge this presents is that I am following a preacher whose focus was on the newcomers and “outsiders” (what Waite called “preaching to shape the new Moundridge.”), often resulting in alienating the faithful “insiders.” My preaching, on the other hand, focuses on those that are already in the community and shaping them for work in the world. As I prepare and preach, I am mindful of the visitors among us but I am, in truth, not a seekers’ preacher. This is not to say that seekers find nothing in my preaching. The reality is, like many of our mainline

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<sup>26</sup> Phil Waite, “Preaching as a Catalyst for Testimony in a Post-Mennonite Context,” The Chicago Seminary, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

neighbors, we don't have a lot of seekers (Nor did we during the previous era). We might have folks seeking a new church home, but it is rare that someone entirely new to faith comes in the door. Hence, it seems wise to focus on preaching that sends a congregation out into the world equipped to encounter others in their workaday lives and neighborhoods.

Waite is the one who introduced me to *The End of Words* by Richard Lischer. He cites Lischer (although the source is unclear): "The formation of a people has been replaced by the persuasion of individuals."<sup>28</sup> This is an accurate reflection of the challenge I face in this new call and the contrast between my predecessor's preaching and my own. He also cites Charles Campbell (again, source unclear): "In a critique of narrative preaching, Charles Campbell makes the case that one of the tendencies in narrative preaching is to narrate God into our lives, when, according to Campbell, the task of preaching is to narrate the congregation into the biblical world."<sup>29</sup>

Waite reflects on the foundational importance of witness and testimony. He doesn't use the word evangelism. We have that in common. And while he doesn't explicitly say so, it would appear that, like me, he prefers a word that does not imply exhortation to personal conversion for the sake of salvation from eternal damnation. That is a rather negative definition of evangelism and it's all mine. But I use it because the word evangelism has become so colored by a personal conversion movement, that it seems better to avoid the word. My husband, a lifelong member of the ELCA and its

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 36-37.

predecessor bodies, argues that the term “evangelical” is so laden politically that the ELCA might want to consider changing our name!

In addition to witness and testimony, Waite uses the word “voice.”

. . . what kind of voice can bring and hold a community together? What kind of voice can break through the cacophony of messages coming from media of all kinds? It is a voice that is clearly shaped by the cultural linguistic framework found in the scriptures. It is a voice that gives witness to both the character and actions of God. It is a voice that is conscious that the testimony it gives runs counter to the testimonies of the many voices around us. It is a voice able to articulate particular ways in which our own lives are woven into the story of God. It is a voice filled with hope, looking to a future when God’s vision for God’s people and all creation will be fulfilled. It is a voice passionately aware of God’s goodness. This voice is the voice of testimony, and finding it is critical to the witness and mission of First Mennonite Church in Moundridge. This voice needs to be found, not just by preachers but by whole congregations, whole communities of faith. Preaching plays a role as a catalyst for congregations to find a voice of testimony.<sup>30</sup>

I appreciate Waite’s work and could see returning to it in the future as I puzzle over the motto hanging in our church: “Wherever you are in your story with God, you are welcome here.” I prefer that of Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Plymouth, MN: “Finding our place in God’s unfolding story.” This difference in emphasis (“your story” versus “God’s story”) is reflected by Waite: “Preaching must be particular in articulating how our own lives, and especially that common life of our ecclesia, are woven into the story of God. . .”<sup>31</sup>

Clint Scott does an exploration of the effectiveness of expository preaching on evangelism. He understands evangelism according to my earlier definition with the belief

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 12-13.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 13.

that conversion is necessary to save people from suffering an eternity in hell if they do not confess Christ.

He argues for a particular *kind* of preaching to enhance evangelism. I don't intend to focus on a sermon "type" like he does. But it does raise a valid question: Would a particular "type" of sermon be more effective in this task than another type? I have instead been thinking more about content, in part because I am not even sure I could identify what type of sermon I typically preach.

His work reads as much like an apologetic for expository preaching as it does a thesis about how this type of sermon shapes evangelism. He defines expository preaching: ". . . as a method of preaching that proclaims a given text through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, which allows the intended meaning of the biblical text to be made clear to the modern listener."<sup>32</sup>

Two final thoughts on Scott: I found some useful strategies for questions to include in the pre- and post-test regarding identifiers and how long people have been Christian, which I used. And one of his findings was that the sermon series needed to be twice as long as it was in order to be truly effective. Each sermon of his is already twice as long as each sermon of mine. So I too may have been blessed by a longer series. My congregation would not welcome longer sermons.

Cory Jones explored persuasive preaching, understanding that "persuasive preaching's goals is to convince the listener to align his or her attitude and action with the

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<sup>32</sup> Clint E. Scott, "Evaluating the Impact of Expository Preaching upon Evangelism within the East Campus of First Baptist Church Indian Trail, North Carolina," Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008.

message of the sermon.”<sup>33</sup> His model was similar to Marriott’s in that he used twelve folks to participate in surveys and interviews. However, he preached four sermons rather than six. He offered a “ministry program” subsequent to the sermon series and surveyed the listeners to see if the sermon series had influenced them to participate in the ministry program. His work was interesting but did not inform my work, other than the fact that, in his first sermon of the series, he talked about the need for people to simply tell of their own experience.

There were both helpful and unhelpful theses discovered. But perhaps the most significant finding in the literature is the impact of terminology. I did not use “evangelism” as heavily in my searching as I did “witness” and “testimony.” This may well have limited what I found. For example, Marriott’s literature review was not long and he was focused explicitly on evangelism. However, each time I did encounter “evangelism” in the thesis, it was largely aimed at conversation for the sake of salvation from eternal damnation. Where the words “testimony” and “witness” occurred in Marriott’s thesis, the focus was more squarely on sharing one’s story that the hearer might be shaped and inspired. This may have limited the overall review but I believe it led me to the work that most closely reflected, supported, or even challenged my own.

### **Books**

Lillian Daniel’s book highlights the power of what happens when members of a congregation get up on a Sunday morning and bear witness to their own lived experience. She describes the powerful impact this has on both the witness and the hearers. And she

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<sup>33</sup> Cory L. Jones, “Do I Have a Witness in the Building: Persuasive Preaching That Influences Behavior,” Beeson Divinity School, 2001, Abstract.

reflects the struggle that arises when political inclinations get woven into religious identity, as I mentioned above:

Within our denomination, I miss the freedom with which other traditions, especially born-again traditions, discuss their encounters with God. I have my own evangelical yearnings, my own saving experience, but a marked distaste for the politics of exclusivity that often gets thrown in with that theological expression. Could we mainliners, with a vision of inclusivity, also offer the excitement of saving testimonies about a personal relation with Jesus?<sup>34</sup>

Daniels speaks of the fear and anxiety that precedes giving one's testimony and the liberation that follows. One unanticipated result of testimony is the development of the witnesses into church leaders, even if they don't start out that way.

I am convinced that strong lay leadership will be bolstered by the practice of testimony, and where leadership is weak, it might also be fostered. You cannot invite people to tell their faith stories to one another and then be surprised when they become spiritual leaders of the church, and then, spiritual leaders to one another. Once they have testified in church, they will naturally come forward with ideas about other aspects of church life. For a congregation, this is a great blessing.<sup>35</sup>

In *Bearing Witness to the Truth*, Harold Cooke Phillips offers up one of the reasons I believe people are hesitant to witness: the fear that what they are saying isn't *the truth*, as if there is *a single truth* to tell about this big God of ours.

One difficulty in the quest of the truth is that of mistaking a thoroughfare for a terminus. Sometimes we think we have arrived at the truth when we are actually still on the road to it. We may conscientiously think we have found the truth, but there is often a big difference between what we believe the truth to be and what the truth really is—between our idea of reality and reality itself. Whatever we believe to be true is truth for us, but *our truth* may not be *the truth*.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Lillian Daniel, *Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 90.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

<sup>36</sup> Harold Cooke Phillips, *Bearing Witness to the Truth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949), 84-85.

Indeed it can be dangerous or wrong-headed to assume that what we accept as truth is in fact *the* truth. Too often we make the assumption that we must be confident of a particular truth before we witness to our own experience of God. We remain silent for fear of being called wrong, accused of lying or not quite getting to someone else's idea of truth.

For example, one woman I know will begin any word of witness with the powerful love of God, both as she has experienced and that she deeply desires others to discover. A man I know bears witness to the great hope he finds in God. While both are fully true, neither is the full truth. And either might or might not be what someone is hungry to hear. So do these faithful witnesses remain silent until they are sure that the story they have to tell is the right one for the moment? Or do they bear witness to what they know in hope that the listener will come to believe that there is also a place for them in the God story?

Philips also has a word for the preacher as witness to their own lived experience and understanding of God:

If your sermon is part of you it will not make too much difference whether you preach without notes, from notes, or even read it. . . . The only time a manuscript gets between a preacher and his listeners is when the sermon on the manuscript has not become a part of the preacher. If the truth in the sermon possesses you—if you believe it, feel it, and want to share it—then your manuscript will not be an obstacle, and you will get through to the people. If the truth does not glow in your own soul, speaking extemporaneously will be no guarantee that other hearts will be enkindled. The truth that glows in your own mind and heart will enkindle others, manuscript or no manuscript.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 124.

Ricoeur's *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* argues for the importance of the members of community bearing witness to their own lived experience:

A hermeneutic of revelation must give priority to those modalities of discourse that are most originary [sic] within the language of a community of faith; consequently, those expressions by means of which the members of that community first interpret their experience for themselves and for others.<sup>38</sup>

And again: “. . .testimony calls for interpretation through a more fundamental dialectic, the dialectic of the witness and the things seen. To be a witness is to have participated in what one has seen and to be able to testify to it.”<sup>39</sup>

The essay *The Hermeneutics of Testimony* offers a thorough definition of testimony and how it is effected in words and actions. Ricoeur also addresses the risk of witness as stating our “conviction and devotion to a cause.”<sup>40</sup> “Testimony is the action itself as it attests outside of himself, to the interior man, to his conviction, to his faith.”<sup>41</sup> Ricoeur was useful in the formation of parts of this thesis.

Charles H. Kraft's work *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* did not particularly inform this thesis other than to affirm witness as the way we communicate “God” to one another. “. . .*God is receptor-oriented, seeking to reach his receptors by*

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<sup>38</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 90.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*



*entering their frame of reference* and by participating in their life, in order to be maximally intelligible to them.”<sup>42</sup>

Benjamin T. Conner invites questions as we imagine bringing our witness to the world: “What’s going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond?”<sup>43</sup> He also offers a useful definition of missional theology:

Missional theology is a kind of practical theology that explores in every aspect of the theological curriculum and praxis of the church the implications of the missionary nature of God with the purpose of forming congregations to better articulate the gospel and to live faithfully their vocation to participate in the ongoing redemptive mission of God in a particular context.<sup>44</sup>

Considering Conner’s definition brings to mind a lecture by Tiger McCluen that I heard many years ago. He used The Road to Emmaus story from Luke 24 as an illustration of the best way to do youth ministry by following the example of Jesus. In this story:

- Jesus walks alongside them.
- Jesus asks questions.
- Jesus lets them express their understanding.
- Jesus teaches them.
- Jesus stays with them.
- Jesus worships with them.

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<sup>42</sup> Charles H. Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 16.

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin T. Conner, *Practicing Witness: A Missional Vision of Christian Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 4-5.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

- Jesus vanishes. (What McLuen calls “ducking and getting out of the way as we point to the cross.”)

This is a successful illustration because it is both vocation and contextual. As we consider how preaching shapes witnesses, we encourage the faithful to operate within their own contexts and vocations.

Charles Campbell’s book explores Hans Frei and articulates the role of preaching in shaping a people: “Guided by Frei’s work, the preacher’s task much be seen not as that of creating experiential events for individual hearers, but rather as that of building up the church.”<sup>45</sup>

Rather than asking how texts connect with predetermined individual needs or how they connect with “general human experience” or how they are relevant to American society, preachers should quite consciously ask what the Spirit is saying to the *church* through the church’s Scripture. The focus is not simply on what a text “means” but on how a particular passage of Scripture functions to “build up” the people of God in and for the world. The movement, again, is from the narratively rendered identity of God in Jesus Christ to the identity of the church as a character in that ongoing story.<sup>46</sup>

In *Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*, Harry Lee Poe offers themes that are similar to that of Robert Jones in *The End of White Christian America* but from an evangelical point of view. In the latter part of his book he moves his purpose to conversion. But I appreciate his evaluation of the church’s deep connection to culture and that our “first reaction tends to be the impulse to save the culture.”<sup>47</sup> Poe’s book was

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<sup>45</sup> Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997, 221.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 230.

<sup>47</sup> Harry Lee Poe, *Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 14.

useful in bringing a Christian “insider’s” perspective to the argument for the demise of WCA but otherwise did not inform this thesis.

There are additional works that I have read and explored but not reviewed in this chapter, in large part because they are so well known in the preaching canon. These include *The Witness of Preaching* by Tom Long and *Preaching as Testimony* by Anna Carter Florence. Both have informed my preaching regardless of thesis, project, or particular aim, Long in particular by helping narrow the focus of a sermon. He is also cited in other parts of this thesis. Florence encourages physically engaging with the passage by writing it out by hand and other “Exercises for Attending,”<sup>48</sup> something I now practice nearly weekly.

Reflecting on the literature review, I have spent the majority of space unpacking and reacting to the doctoral dissertations I’ve been able to uncover. They have been highly informative in helping focus my approach to my thesis topic, “Preaching to Shape Christian Witness.” Works by authors of books I’ve researched, and referenced this chapter, also speak to my thesis. And while I have been enlightened by some of these authors, I believe it is more helpful to the current exploration of the topic of “witness” to have discussed, at some length, current doctoral theses.

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<sup>48</sup> Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 139.

## CHAPTER 4

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As I considered the goal of moving congregation members to bear witness to their experience of God, I settled on the action/reflection model for my project. In such a large congregation, the primary interaction a pastor has with most members is worship. Worship offers the greatest, and often only, opportunity to model witness and to offer pastoral words of encouragement and exhortation to live lives of discipleship.

In my previous call, as the solo pastor, I led all aspects of worship with a lay worship assistant. Preaching and liturgy are both significant relational connections between pastor and congregation. However, in my new call, the congregation has more than one pastor. If one pastor is preaching, another is presiding. As the lead pastor, my job description states that I will do at least two-thirds of the preaching. Therefore, the primary worship interaction I have with the majority of members of this congregation is the sermon. The action/reflection project using a sermon series aligns with the centrality of preaching in worship to my relationship with my large congregation.

Additionally, the action/reflection project requires a method of measuring the effectiveness of the action: in this case, preaching. The use of pre-series and post-series surveys not only provides useful assessment for how much an action has moved a person or group toward a desired goal, but the surveys also give a new pastor additional insight

into the members of her congregation. In spite of the challenges of this project, mentioned below and in Chapter 6, there was a subtle serendipity in using this model as I came to find a preaching voice in a new setting and came to know this new congregation.

Having settled on the action/reflection model, I issued a pre-sermon series survey, preached four sermons, and issued a post-sermon series survey. The project was straightforward enough, but before I go into the details, it's important to mention a "disruption" that had a significant impact on planning, timing, execution, and, I believe, outcome.

Just over halfway through the work toward this degree, I accepted a new call, moving from a solo call in a congregation of just over 500 members to a congregation of over 3000 members with three pastors and a staff of 23 (this also included a household move). By the time of the project, I had not yet had time to develop the social capital and familiarity that I had at my former congregation. I was and still am learning the people and the larger context.

While the issue of witness is just as real in both congregations, my prior congregation had grown together in faith in such a way that a project focused on telling our God stories was a natural next step. In the new congregation, I worried it would be a bigger challenge to achieve measurable change because they don't know me as well. We are still building trust, and we haven't shared the same journey of faith that made this project a natural fit for the former congregation.

I gave serious consideration to changing the project focus but chose not to for several reasons. First, I am committed to completing this degree with my remarkable cohort and walking through graduation together. This may not sound like a primary

reason to the “uninitiated,” but the love, support, and empathy of the cohort is central in keeping one on track and, some days, in the program. Second, this call is much larger and the work load heavier than my previous call. Therefore it was unrealistic to start over on all the reading and research. If I didn’t keep up the momentum of the ongoing work and the relationship with and support of the cohort, I feared that I would simply walk away. And third, at the time of the sermon series—as late as possible in this process—I wasn’t entirely clear on what a better project might be. I didn’t know the congregation any better than they knew me. Therefore, since the original topic is of interest to me and the reluctance of people to bear witness is true in both congregations, it seemed wise to stay the course, no matter the outcome.

I offer none of this as any kind of excuse. Rather, as explanation which will be more fully explored in the evaluation section of this paper.

Given all that, the sermon series began just nine months into the new call. My work focused on equipping hearers to identify their own lived experience of God and to talk about it without apology. Together we would talk God and about church as a place where folks can imagine that an experience of God is possible. In addition, we would discover that an experience of God need not be limited to a defined set of parameters to make it count. Ideally these conversations would take place between a hearer and someone “outside” the church. But frankly, if hearers could learn to share their experiences with one another within the congregational community, that would be a step forward for most. And I am confident that taking that step would make moving the story “outside” much more likely.

## **The Project**

For the project, I chose four Sundays in the fall of 2017 to preach four sermons designed to inspire and encourage listeners to tell their own stories of God. While this timeframe gave me less time to evaluate results and start writing the thesis, there were three significant reasons for doing so:

1. We have a large number of members who are absent in the summer due to weekends at cabins and travel. This is especially true of our younger families, whom I hoped to engage in the project. Worship attendance is higher overall in the fall.
2. We have an alternate worship site—a defunct drive-in theater—that we have used to host our summer contemporary service for about 30 years. This means the preacher is scrambling to get from one site to the next. There is limited opportunity to connect with the worshippers since most of them stay in their cars, and a good number of the drive-in worshippers are non-members. For the purposes of this project, I wanted to focus on those who had already “joined the church club,” especially because I am still getting to know the congregation and because those who haven’t yet made the commitment to the club have a different story to tell.
3. Each month that I delayed the sermon series was one more month for the congregation to get to know and trust me.

## **Pre-series Survey**

Prior to the first sermon, I used Survey Monkey to conduct a pre-series survey to be completed by worship participants. Ideally those who participated would commit to

attending worship all four Sundays (or watching the sermons online) and complete a follow-up survey.

In order to match pre-surveys to post-surveys, I asked people to list either mother's maiden name or the name of their first pet, and their birth month and year. This did require that they remember what they listed—maiden name or pet—and they were reminded to do just that.

Aside from the identifiers and some demographic information, the survey was 11 questions long, including only essay question. Sample questions include:

- Do you believe God is active in the world?
- Do you believe Christians should talk about their faith/experience of God/church?

Depending on the question, respondents could choose from a scale (Agree, Slightly Agree, Not Sure, Slightly Disagree, Disagree) or from Yes/No/Not Sure. The questions, listed in full in the appendix, were intended to be accessible for anyone of any age to answer.

“Not sure” was included as an option because, as I state at the outset, some people aren't sure or are hesitant to believe that something they experienced was or could be of God. There needed to be space for that to be reflected.

The survey was made available through our weekly digital newsletter for several weeks prior to and two weeks into the series. Participants had only to click on a link to take the survey. We also put an announcement in the bulletin for those who wished to take a paper survey. We got no requests for paper surveys.



### Sermon Series

As I worked with our worship team to set the four Sundays for this series, we spent time in discernment about which Bible texts to use as preaching texts. This is a significant consideration regardless of the congregation, but my church's circumstances made the discernment even more complex for several reasons.

This congregation has not only endured a history of conflict, but worship has been profoundly shaped by ecclesiastical, homiletical, and theological leadership decisions. Among those decisions was a commitment to an expansive welcome. Welcome, expansive welcome, is a good thing, make no mistake. One of the treasured mottos of the congregation, hung on a huge banner above the entry to the narthex, is: "Wherever you are in your journey with God, you are welcome here." It is a fine word of welcome. But as one member of the call committee said, "We need to welcome people *to* something," meaning that the desire to be welcoming had eclipsed making or being invited to any theological or scriptural commitments.

The impact of making the priority of worship a kind of "theologically undefined approachability" was not insignificant. The result was a severe reduction in liturgical elements, even at the tradition service, and a limit to the amount of Bible read during worship. One person remarked that for a period of eight years the Bible was almost never used for preaching or worship. And if the Bible was used, it was a short verse or two chosen after the theme was chosen. In fact, shortly after I arrived, a gentleman told me that he thinks I read *too much* Bible in worship, even though our congregation closely follows the Narrative Lectionary and we read just one passage each week.

Theologically, there was an inclination among one or more of the previous pastors to shy away from Lutheran Christianity in favor of a more Unitarian-Universalist theology and, in some cases, a self-help style of preaching. We were, at one point, one of the largest churches in our synod. And yet when asked if he was pastor at the large Lutheran church in our town, the previous pastor was overheard to say at a gathering “We aren’t *that* Lutheran.” This “de-Lutheranization” was understood to be a goal. The previous pastor had the office staff stop using Lutheran in the name of the church when they answered the phone.

I wish I could describe it for the reader more accurately but many people, including me, are reluctant to spend much time in detailed negative conversations about past leaders, which is understandable and makes getting the full story challenging.

So even as we were exploring when to offer this sermon series, I was mindful of the hard work we had done in the previous nine months to restore some liturgical rhythm (if not outright liturgy), Lutheran theology, and Bible to worship. I was hesitant to do a “themed” series, because themes were previously a higher priority than Scripture in shaping worship and preaching. Frankly, I didn’t want to lose any of the ground we were gaining in worship. And we were gaining ground. One member, a retired pastor, approached me in tears after worship one day and said, “Thank you for bringing Jesus back.” I am not boasting. I strive to be a faithful Lutheran pastor, as I was called and trained. But it is sign of how far the congregation had gone in one direction or no direction and the importance of the work we now share.

The determination was made to use the assigned Bible readings for each of the four Sundays. While this can result in forcing a topic into a text that doesn’t welcome it,

it also invites both the preacher and the listeners to see, hear, and taste God in whatever passage we read. And it helps demonstrate that nearly any passage of Scripture can give us a story to tell about the God who draws us back to worship week after week and a story to tell about the God we experience in our own lives.

One further complication: In honor of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, we did decide to do a five-week series on the “Solas,” two of which fell within my project timeline. There were assigned texts for those Sundays that we chose in place of the Narrative Lectionary reading. It was, in a word, insanity. But the decision, largely mine, was made to let high quality, faithful, Bible-based, and theologically sound worship take priority over the project of a single person.

Thus, the four readings used in the series were:

1. September 17: Genesis 1:1-2:4 (Narrative Lectionary)
2. September 24: Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23 & 28:10-17 (Narrative Lectionary)
3. October 8: Romans 3:21-31 (Sola Fide)
4. October 15: Hebrews 4:14—5:10 (Solus Christus)

#### September 17: Genesis 1:1-2:4

This was Trinity Fest Sunday, our version of Rally Day. We worshipped outdoors under a large tent that had been set up for several days, “advertising” the special Sunday to come. We also had food trucks and a ministry fair set up under another tent. The night before we hosted a “Hymns and Hops” event, complete with a band, food truck, free root beer, and beer for purchase from a well-loved local brewery.

This Sunday typically has a higher-than-average worship attendance as people gather back for the start of school and the start of the program year. The festival setting of this worship is also a great draw. This is only the second year for the tent setting. The first year occurred as the call process for a new lead pastor was wrapping up. Leadership wanted Rally Day to be a hopeful celebration about the congregation's future.

The purpose of this first sermon in the series was to highlight the work of God: cosmic, eternal, and immediate. My intent was for people to imagine that our Creator continues to create and that we are part of that ongoing creative activity. I did not, in this sermon, ask people to identify or say anything about God in their own lives. Rather, since this was a first Sunday back for many, this sermon was intended to open their imagination and remind them of our deep connection to God's ongoing creative activity in the world.

September 24: Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23 & 28:10-17

In this sermon, I made a more deliberate move to show how God acts in the lives of God's people, from the Old Testament, through Jesus, and even now. This time I told of God's lively and active presence in my own life. I did this for two reasons: to help people identify what God's activity might already look like in their lives and to model telling the story. The stories I told of my life were short and simply told. While people might be inclined to imbue in their religious leaders some special capacity to both experience and identify God, I made no such claim. I tried only to portray the reality of God's persistent presence and activity.

This sermon includes an exhortation for people to tell their own story of God's activity and presence. In the sermon I didn't specifically say "Do *this*. Do it *this way*."

But I believe the exhortation is clear. There is more in the evaluation section of this paper reflecting ways I could have been more instructive, helpful, and specific.

October 8: Romans 3:21-31 (Sola Fide)

This sermon made an effort to illustrate that we are all shaped by narratives, for good and for bad. Using current events, Facebook, and the witness of the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther, I strived to help people understand that we are invariably shaped by narratives and that we have an inclination to create narratives that self-justify our opinions and attitudes. The joy and freedom of the Christian is that we have the opportunity to be shaped by and to carry a fresh, life-giving, alternate narrative into the world with us.

October 15: Hebrews 4:14—5:10 (Solus Christus)

In addition to the Reformation series and my D. Min. project, this sermon needed to kick off the fall stewardship drive. There was no specific “ask” in this sermon vis-à-vis the project. But as part of the series, I tried to add language to lift people out of a sense of unworthiness, including unworthiness to discern, experience, and tell their story of God, into a place of understanding that they are part of this glorious gospel and capable of bearing the good news into the world.

**Post-Series Survey**

The post-series survey was intended to measure the effectiveness of the sermons in encouraging participants to share their stories of an experience with God. I did not require that only persons who heard all four sermons and completed the pre-series survey could complete the post-series survey. The post-survey asked many of the same questions

as the pre-survey, in order to most effectively determine whether or not the sermon series had changed anyone's thinking.

The post-survey asked whether "during or after the sermon series" people had spoken with others about their experience of God. The survey also asked if "during or after the sermon series" they felt differently about the expectations of a Christian to speak about God/church/faith. I specifically asked about the response to the sermon series to see if the respondent was able to identify a direct link between what they heard and their behavior, confidence, or ability to speak about such things. The full list of questions is in the appendix.

This survey was intended to be included in the digital newsletter the week following the conclusion of the sermon series. For some reason, it was not. It is not helpful for the purposes of this thesis to address why communication got bungled. What matters is that the survey did not hit the newsletter or bulletins as soon as it ideally should have. The survey made it into the digital newsletter eleven days after the last sermon (the first possible newsletter would have been four days after the last sermon). As with the pre-survey, it took only one click to access the survey, and we offered a paper option in the bulletins. Again, no one asked for a paper survey.

One frustration with this survey was that, in spite of having someone test it, one question didn't work right away. At the end of the survey I asked people to choose which of the four sermons they had been able to hear. To start with, I had inadvertently set up the survey to allow only one choice. This gaffe was missed on the test. A respondent alerted me to the error very quickly, and I was able to change it immediately. To my

knowledge, only two people weren't able to answer the question as I intended it to be answered.

Overall, I am satisfied that the action-reflection model was appropriate for my goals in this project. As reflected in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, the survey was useful in creating a window into my new congregation. Even if the window was rather small. And it remains true that preaching is my primary connection to the majority of members in this church. So a preaching series, flanked by surveys, was a useful tool.

However, as initially stated and more fully reflected in the evaluation, the project of preaching to create and encourage witness was neither the ideal project for this new setting nor the ideal timing for a project. But I rarely preach sermon series, preferring to follow a lectionary, having tighter boundaries around the sermons for four weeks was a fresh and fascinating exercise.

## CHAPTER 5

### INTRODUCTION

The results of this project were not stunning. There was too little participation in the follow-up survey, too narrow a demographic group responding, and no significant changes in the responses between the two surveys. But there is always something to be learned.

#### **The Survey Tool**

For the pre- and post-series surveys, I used Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)). One important feature is the provision of a direct link to the survey, making it very easy for respondents to access and use. The respondents reported no difficulty using the tool.<sup>1</sup>

#### **The Pre-survey**

I am grateful to Clint Scott's D.Min. thesis<sup>2</sup> for creating confidential identifiers and to Dan Anderson from Luther Seminary for his review of the questions before the survey was issued. There are things about this survey that I am satisfied with and those that I would do differently if I had the chance.

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<sup>1</sup> There was one reported designer error. In the post-survey, I asked which of the four sermons people had been able to listen to. The first version of the post-survey only allowed respondents to select one of the four. A respondent reported the error immediately and I was able to fix it early.

<sup>2</sup> Clint E. Scott, "Evaluating the Impact of Expository Preaching," 104.



First, I am satisfied that people were given a chance to respond to some questions in more than one way, such as:

- Please respond to this statement: God is active in my life.
- Please respond to this statement: I believe/hope I HAVE had an experience of/with God.
- Have you ever spoken to anyone about your experience of/with God?
- Please respond to this statement: Christians should speak to others about their experience of/with God.

This gave respondents the opportunity to reflect on the same question from a variety of perspectives: personal experience, ability and willingness to talk about that experience, and any sense of obligation to do so.

I wish I had asked a question about what might make it easier to talk about one's experience of God. Some did provide that perspective in the question: "Please feel free to share whatever you like about the idea of talking with others about your experience of or with God? Motivations, fears, etc."

I also regret that I did not ask why they answered some of the questions the way they did, by adding a simple "why or why not" as a follow up question. For example, it would be interesting to know why several respondents were less sure that a Christian should talk about their *faith* but more sure that a Christian should talk about their *church*. Although this didn't surprise me, being the basis of my project, I would have liked to hear why they believe this.

### **The Post-Survey**

This survey paralleled the pre-survey through the first several question because I wanted to see if anything had changed in their overall attitudes following the sermon series. Then there was a slight difference between the two surveys. Where the pre-survey

asked if people had spoken to someone about their faith or their experience of God, in the post-survey, the question read: “During or after the sermon series have you spoken to anyone. . .” This was an unveiled attempt to directly ascertain if the sermon series had motivated, inspired, or impelled a respondent who may have not spoken to someone about their faith or their experience of God prior to the series to do so. This addition to the question also invited people to reflect on what they had heard in the sermons that might help them speak out in a way they were reluctant to before.

The post-survey asked a slightly different “essay” style question: “Please share a brief paragraph outlining your motivations, fears, and questions about talking with others about your experience of or with God?” The post-survey also asked: “How often have you spoken with others about your experience of God? Daily, weekly, etc.”

The most significant difference between the two surveys was that the post-survey offered the opportunity to share more information after the following questions:

- After “Please respond to this statement: I believe/hope I HAVE had an experience of/with God,” the respondent could answer: If you answered yes, please describe one such experience.
- After “During or after the sermon series have you spoken to anyone about your experience of/with God?” the respondent could answer: If you answered yes, please give a brief description of the experience.
- After “During or after the sermon series have you spoken to anyone about your faith?” the respondent could answer: If you answered yes, please briefly describe the experience.

These were the kinds of follow up questions I regret not including in the pre-survey.

The post-survey received far fewer responses than the pre-survey, 14 versus 54. I will reflect more on why this might be the case later in this section.

## The Sermons

Frankly, it is discomfiting to read back through one's own sermons or to watch video of one's own preaching. I know I am not alone when I say that typically I preach a sermon and move on. Often by Tuesday I have to stop and think in order to remember what I preached two days earlier. It is a new experience to dwell so deeply on one's own preaching for the purposes of this project.

Overall, I am satisfied with the sermons as sermons. One can always find ways to improve, but the gospel was preached faithfully. For this project, I will focus on the sermons from the perspective of what I had hoped to accomplish.

### Sermon 1—September 17—Genesis 1:1-2:4

The purpose of this first sermon in the series was to highlight the work of God: cosmic, eternal, and immediate. My intent was for people to imagine that our Creator continues to create and that we are part of that ongoing creative activity. Generally, I am satisfied that this was a creative sermon that said what I intended it to say.

This sermon was preached in a tent on our lawn. Our reader for the morning was excellent and experienced, with a deeply resonant voice. The entire reading had been set to music, with instruments making the sounds one could imagine occurring at the creation of each thing. It was stirring and imaginative. For the sermon, I asked the reader to read the passage again, this time in sections. The sermon was also preached in sections, responding to the reading accordingly. It created a fun and interesting duet between reader and preacher. The feedback we got about both was positive. People largely appreciated hearing the passages again because it helped the sermon make sense.

What I hoped to accomplish was to enliven people's imagination through an imaginative exposition of how we are created and called by God to be partners in God's ongoing creative activity and by offering examples, both serious and whimsical, of what that looks like in real life. The intent with this sermon was to kick off the series with the assurance that God is active in the world and that our lives are linked to that ongoing activity. I wanted people to leave the sermon believing that it is possible that God is active not only in the world, but in and through their lives.

Sermon 2—September 24—Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23 & 28:10-17

In this sermon, I both model telling stories about how God has been active in my life and exhort the listeners to tell their own stories.

Sermon 3—October 8—Romans 3:21-31 (Sola Fide)

In this sermon, part of our Reformation celebration Sola Series, I speak about the life-giving narrative that shapes us. And I directly instruct people to tell the story:

Our world, our country, our neighbors are aching for a new narrative, a new truth. And we who know Jesus have a story to tell. A story that can erase the black line of division. A life-giving narrative about a God of liberation, redemption, wholeness, belonging and equity. Hungry hearts are eager for the good news, the story that shapes us and has the power to shape our world. Go in peace today. And tell the story.

Sermon 4—October 15—Hebrews 4:14—5:10 (Solus Christus)

There is much that can be said about this sermon. I had a great deal of ground to cover in one sermon: D.Min sermon series, Reformation Sola Series, and stewardship.

## **Results**

The results of this project were disappointing, both in participation and hoped-for outcomes.

### **Participation**

Worship attendance at our congregation is probably highest in the fall, when our average attendance is around 400 people on a Sunday. This afforded an ample pool of potential participants in the project. Although only 54 people completed the pre-series survey, this was a satisfactory number and statistically useful. This number provides a decent window into the perspectives of the congregation on the possibility of God's activity in the world and the Christian's responsibility to tell that story.

Sadly, only 14 completed the post-survey and only 10 completed both surveys. As a result, the data available to measure the impact of the sermon series is quite limited. The response to the first survey came in quite fast, with the bulk of respondents completing the survey within a span of a few days, which indicates some energy and responsiveness to a particular ask. This was in stark contrast to the post-survey where the responses came in over the course of more than a month.

I have pondered why there was an enthusiastic response to the first survey and such an anemic response to the second. It could be that I didn't emphasize enough the importance of completing both surveys for the project to be most valid and informative. There is also the humbling and embarrassing possibility that people who took the first survey knew that they had nothing to add following the sermon series so just didn't bother.

### Summary Results—Pre-survey

Overall, the respondents to this survey Agree that God is active in the world and in their lives. In the pre-survey, nearly 95% of respondents already Agreed or Slightly Agreed that *God is active in their lives*. Nearly 93% believe or hope they have had an experience of God. And almost 91% agreed that Christians should talk to others about *their experience of God*. So while the sermon series might have been able to persuade listeners to act, there wasn't a great need to change listeners' thinking about God's activity in the world and in their lives. Interestingly, of those who Agreed Christians should tell others about *their experience of God*, 32% only Slightly Agreed, so there is still room for growth there.

The respondents also Agree that Christians should be talking to others about their *faith*, about *God or Jesus*, about their *experience of God*, and about their *church*. Not surprising, the greatest number (over 98%) Agree or Slightly Agree that Christian should talk about their *church*. The expectation that Christians should talk to others about their *faith* was 93%, about *God or Jesus* was 93%, and about one's *experience of God* was 91%.

It is interesting that far more people fully Agree (not Slightly Agree) that *God is active in the world* (89%) and in *their lives* (87%) than believe that Christians should talk about such things. Those that Agree (not Slightly Agree) that *Christians should talk to others about their faith* was 58%, about *God or Jesus* was 59%, and about one's *experience of God* was 58%. There appears to be a measurable disconnect between what it is respondents believe and what it is respondents think Christians are should to talk about.

This contrast is all the more startling as I look at the literature. Marriot's project comes to mind. He used a sermon series, a small group, and a set of actions steps to encourage evangelism. He had little trouble getting buy-in from his participants that Christians are *expected* to evangelize, that they are in fact in a battle for people's souls!<sup>3</sup> There wasn't such an enthusiastic response from my respondents, except when it came to the expectation that we should talk about our church. 76% Agree (not Slightly Agree) that Christian should speak to others about their church. The irony of this finding, in the face of what led me to this project in the first place, is not lost on me.

The "essay" question responses were rich and varied but a few themes emerged. The question on the pre-survey was: "Please feel free to share whatever you like about the idea of talking with others about your experience of or with God? Motivations, fears, etc."

Most responses were much as one might expect. Some folks felt living one's faith is more important than talking about one's faith. Many expressed concerns about being too pushy or of the necessity to respect other faiths and other faith journeys. The theme of respect was a common one. The individual faith journey was a huge priority in this congregation over the past decade, and that appears to be reflected here. Several respondents talked about it being easier to speak about faith or God with family and friends or when they are asked. A couple of respondents were openly enthusiastic. One such respondent wrote: "God, jesus [sic], church is a central part of my life.

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald Wayne Marriott, "Motivating Christians Toward Personal Evangelism Through Preaching from Selected Passages in Luke and Acts."

Consequently, when I am sharing about myself with friends and family I talk about my life, including God, Jesus [sic], and church.”

Other respondents reflected that telling one’s story needs to come from a place of authenticity and one’s own experience. For example: “I think these conversations need to stem from a natural experience with the focus on the final audience. I often will refer to the fact that my faith and experiences with God are what allow me to focus on the 'good' pieces of life and the strength to get thru [sic] those times when things are not going as well.”

Were it not for the commitment to confidentiality, I would be interested in tracking this respondent down for further conversation. As I peruse these responses, it occurs to me that perhaps a fruitful approach to shaping witnesses might be to get people in a room together for peer-to-peer conversation. There are those who are fearful to tell their stories or find it unnecessary, preferring to let their life speak, and there are those that seem enthusiastic about talking about faith. What a fascinating conversation that might be!

### **Summary Results—Post-survey**

As noted earlier, the response to the survey following the sermon series was anemic. Of the 14 who did respond, either four did not take the pre-survey or I was unable to match their identifiers. Although I didn’t get nearly the number of responses I had hoped for on this survey, I ventured forth and looked carefully at the responses I did get to see what might be learned.



There are two ways to look at this data: including the four respondents that did not take the pre-survey or excluding the four respondents that did not take the pre-survey.

Here we see the comparison of those who agreed only with the following statements:

**Table 1: Post-Series Survey Data, Agree Only**

	With all respondents	Only those who took the pre-survey
Agree God active in life	100%	100%
Christians should talk about faith	64%	70%
...about God/Jesus	64%	80%
...about experience of God	50%	70%
...about their church	77%	90%

Here is the comparison combining Agree with Slightly Agree.

**Table 2: Post-Series Survey Data, Agree Plus Slightly Agree**

	With all respondents	Only those who took the pre-survey
Agree God active in life	100%	100%
Christians should talk about faith	100%	100%
...about God/Jesus	100%	100%
...about experience of God	93%	80%
...about their church	100% (one did not answer)	100%

One could observe that the four respondents who did not take the pre-survey added more texture to the data. Unfortunately, I cannot tell from the full response of those who did not take the pre-survey if there was an appreciable difference in their thinking or behavior that resulted from the sermon series. None of them remarked on a

change, although one respondent mentioned that she speaks to others about her faith or God a couple of times weekly. However, she also wrote: “I feel that I am still so early in learning about faith that I am probably not the guide for anyone new. I will tell people about my connection to TLC if interest is shown. . . .” Interestingly, even one who appears to speak frequently and willingly about God and faith is most comfortable talking about church.

Looking over the full responses of the 10 that took both surveys, a few notable things emerge.

- On the question “Christians should talk about their faith,” one shifted from Slightly Agree to Agree after the series. This person had already fully Agreed on the other questions. This person mentioned on both surveys how shy and introverted they are, which makes telling their story very difficult.
- One person shifted from “Agree” to “Slightly Agree” in response to: “I believe I have had an experience of/with God.” They went on to write very profoundly of God’s guiding presence in their life. They also noted: “I feel that there is a spiritual side to life that is innate in all of us. Like anything, it gets varying degrees of attention. My faith is a work in progress. I am not wired to evangelize, but in the course of interacting with others if conversation heads to this arena I am comfortable talking about where I am at.”
- Two respondents shifted from Slightly Agree to Agree on the question: “Christian should tell about their experience of God.” They both were already at Agree on the other questions.

- To the question “During or after the sermon series have you spoken to other about your experience of/with God?” one replied: “with my brother but the sermons didn’t lead me to do so further??” [sic] This is the same person who wrote: “I was actually looking forward to a more concrete encouragement during the sermon series but either I missed it or it wasn't that clearly done.” This person was unable to list the sermons they heard because they took the survey before the previously mentioned glitch was fixed.
- One respondent shifted from Agree on the pre-survey to Slightly Agree on the post-survey on whether or not Christians should talk about their faith and from Not Sure to Slightly Agree on whether Christians should talk about their experience of/with God. They did not provide any illumination for this shift.

Of the ten that completed both surveys, all but one of them shared a story of some kind of experience of God, from tangible events to feelings of peace. It was lovely to read their stories and hear their hope.

The only one who didn’t share a story was the one who expressed so fully their introversion and shyness, even mentioning that they cry very easily and talking with others about faith feels like a “big risk.” Although one cannot read too much through the cloak of Survey Monkey, I discern that it causes no small amount of pain to this person that they cannot tell the story as they believe the Christian should. This person is certainly not alone in that fear, and perhaps comfort and encouragement would have been provided by clearer suggestions in the sermons.

One person wrote something that really captures the essence of my project and of the congregation as a whole:

I honor all peoples' belief systems, faith-based or otherwise. My hope is to live a life based on compassion and service to others, all in the name of following Jesus. However, I don't feel compelled to state that my love for Jesus is why I am serving others. Not so much a fear, as I am not motivated to place my values on others. I am also continually disappointed by churches and others who, in the name of being Christian, are not reaching out and serving others who are not like them. I find that so disturbing. Jesus came for all. Period. I struggle with any kind of tolerance of those who don't act on that most basic Christian premise/belief.”

Jesus did indeed come for all, but how do we help people understand the liberation in that proclamation if they don't learn what it means?

There is a strong mission and service ethic in this congregation. Many members are deeply involved in both local and international mission. We have several octogenarians who still travel as Red Cross nurses following disasters. We have a long history of annual service trips to Mexico and frequent trips to Tanzania. Members not only serve directly but many are on boards and in leadership positions for organizations that provide direct service.

There is no question that people openly live their faith. But the question still remains: Do they name the connection of their activity to Jesus Christ? Do they tell their stories as readily as they sign up to serve a monthly supper? The answer remains, largely, no.

The data is so limited it's hard to say for sure, but it would appear from the survey data that the sermon series did not have an appreciable impact on the likelihood of people telling their stories. What did happen was that 13 people told me their stories in the post-survey. And that, in my view, was a solid start. Yes, they typed them into a computer knowing only their pastor would see them. But the truth is, people can be just as reluctant to tell their pastors their faith stories because of the assumption that we might have a special capacity to identify the veracity of an experience of God.

On the other hand, people will tell their stories to their pastor. And when they do, it is often with the hope that what they experienced is of God and they think that I, as a pastor, bring gravitas to the affirmation that, yes, they did experience God. We can never “know” for sure. But we live with a sure and certain hope that God is indeed active. And telling our story, as Lischer reminds us, helps shape not only who we are but who we believe in.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*.

## CHAPTER 6

### EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

On the first day of the first summer residency in the D. Min in Biblical Preaching Program, several of us in the cohort reported that one of the reasons we were in the program was because our sermon feedback loop seemed to have dried up. We were unable to discern if this was because our congregations had grown so accustomed to our preaching that responses seemed unnecessary. Or perhaps, and more worrisome, we had lost our preaching “edge” and there just wasn’t much to say. Whatever the case, I chose to pursue the Doctor of Ministry degree in order to learn and to grow as a preacher. To that end, the project, along with three years of intensive coursework, was a success. However, not only am I unsatisfied with the results of the project, I am not entirely satisfied with the project itself.

#### **Choice of Topic**

While I am still engaged by the topic chosen for this project, as I have stated before, it was not as good a fit for this current congregation as it would have been for the congregation I was serving during the first two years of the D. Min work. The first congregation was largely a unified “people,” ready to make an impact in the world in the name of Jesus. They had done serious work in understanding that faith is alive and active and that it is the Spirit of Jesus that impels the baptized into the world in love and service.

What they were shy about was naming Jesus as the source of their service. By and large, I have discovered that the congregation was ready to learn how to talk about faith in a way that went beyond simply describing their congregation like a club. Whether this meant describing an experience of God or simply stating the fact that “I serve in the name of Jesus Christ,” they were ready for the next step.

Furthermore, they had become engaged with a local, faith-based, community-organizing non-profit group. Several key leaders and members of the congregation were regularly participating in public meetings and public actions calling for justice in the name of Jesus whom we follow. They had worked actively against predatory lenders, gone door-to-door to talk with people about what would get them to the polls, participated in a public Pride fest worship in their community, and invited people to come and see a congregation that truly cared about their neighbors. While they were also active in regular—and largely expected—volunteerism, mission trips, and collections for various organizations in the community, they had gone one step further and taken their faith public.

Somehow they had come to realize that a bold proclamation of the expansive love and grace of Jesus was not disrespectful of anyone else’s journey or faith commitments. Even though they had Muslim, Hindu, and diverse friends and neighbors, many members understood that gospel claim is not one to be lived timidly.<sup>1</sup> Many in the congregation had grown to understand that our bold proclamation is not a denigration of our neighbor.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New American Standard Bible*, 1995th ed. (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1971). Some years earlier the stewardship team had chosen as their theme 2 Timothy 1:7 “For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.” This theme reached beyond stewardship and into the congregation’s public witness.

But in fact, the clearer we are about who we are and who we worship, the more trustworthy we become.

My current congregation is filled with capable and generous people. This congregation has a strong sense of mission and many people are doing something for the church or the community as they have capacity. Two of our octogenarians show up Wednesday after Wednesday to serve pizza to middle schoolers! But what is not as apparent is whether members of this congregation have a sense that they are coming alongside *God's* work in their lives and in the world, let alone whether they are ready to begin speaking about their experience of God.

As stated before, they have been profoundly shaped by an earlier focus on welcome over proclamation and can be hesitant about actions that might be perceived as less than completely welcoming, even if these actions are bold, faithful discipleship. While some of the congregation is delighted that things like scripture and prayer have been reintroduced into worship, some are less certain. As we rebuild our pastoral staff, regain our theological ground, and reinvigorate our worship, we have just begun the work of becoming a people united in faith and finding our voice on behalf of the neighbor in a boldly public way. Therefore, while a project built on “telling our story of an experience of God” is not beyond the reach of this congregation by any means, it is not the most urgent focus, nor was the congregation as ready as they might become.

Another aspect of the topic worth considering is that I chose “talking about one’s experience of God” instead of “talking about one’s faith” as the focus, because too often conversation about one’s faith can sound too much like a conversation about oneself. What I was longing for was for people to describe to their neighbors the experiences they



have had of the ineffable and transcendent, the stories they tell in my office, on retreats, and in Bible studies. To bring those stories into the world is to do more than compete with other clubs for membership. To bring those stories into the world is to bear witness to something beyond ourselves, something that I believe people are longing to experience for themselves.

In retrospect, perhaps broader language would have been helpful for both the project and the listeners. Maybe people aren't ready to talk about an experience of God but could talk about aspects of our life together that other "clubs" don't share, such as worship or prayer.

It could be argued that talking about one's faith instead of one's God is still a step further than just talking about a club. The challenge is that we live in a self-focused, achievement culture. We can couple those observations with the self-help juggernaut and the self-promotion of social media that seems to dominate our public life together. As cynical as it no doubt sounds, talking about one's faith can be misconstrued as or can actually be just another "selfie." "Look what I can do."

The gospel demands that our proclamation be "Look what God can do!" The hope of this project was to hear people identify experiences and use language that moves beyond the self to the Other. And then to encourage those people to tell the world, or at least their neighbors, about the experiences of God that they are already having. That telling would hopefully become inviting those neighbors to "come and see."

Perhaps the biggest learning experience for me from this project is that encouraging people to actually "tell someone about your experience of God" requires more than a sermon series. This question was raised in the initial thesis proposal. I had

applied for and received approval from the IRB to form a small group that would study the preaching texts together, find God's activity in those texts, and imagine together what that kind of activity looks like or has looked like in our own lives. This group would have taken the same pre- and post- surveys as others in the congregation.

The question was whether the small group's post-surveys would differ appreciably from respondents who did not participate in the small group. This is based on the assumption that coaching and support might enhance the hoped-for outcomes of the sermon series.

Another benefit of the small group would have been the opportunity to receive feedback, week to week, about the effectiveness of the sermon in communicating the importance and value of telling our stories. And perhaps this group would have helped shape clearer suggestions and guidance for *how* to tell our stories.

Ultimately the group didn't come together for reasons of time, my uncertainty about who to engage in the group, and the importance of finding a leader to help with the recruiting.

First, I was unable to convene such a group in time for the sermon series to start, and the series could not start later than it already did. Because I was still new, I recruited a person to help lead this group and to identify potential members. I was hoping to find participants beyond the already visibly engaged leaders whom I came to know earlier on in the new call. I had chosen the person I did because this person had come to a staff member asking to start a small group of people interested in having deeper faith conversations than what they were experiencing over coffee and in book groups. This

person was interested in having the kinds of conversations I was hoping to inspire with the series.

Since the group was assembled on the basis of a ready willingness to have deeper faith based conversations, I hoped that they might be willing to spend 4-6 weeks as my project small group. Because the group was still new, the project would not disrupt a set rhythm and might even spark the kind of conversations the leader hoped to inspire. This leader thought and prayed about being part of the project and then declined, in part because they were not comfortable asking the new group to consider this request.

This was the busy start of the school year, and their plan had been to meet monthly. The project required a weekly meeting, if only for a limited time. I was deeply disappointed. This person would have been a great partner in conversation. But I respected their discomfort and honored their boundaries. By that time, the series had to start, so start it did, without the small group. This is the greatest disappointment of the project.

Based on what I have learned in the literature and through the project, if one were to utilize a small group, I would have taken a page from Marriott and given the participants small assignments to try in order to gain even greater confidence and proficiency in telling their story. Such assignments might have included identifying a time in their life when they believed they had an experience of God. Then they might be invited to write the story down and share it with the group. Perhaps the next step would be to identify someone from within the faith community with whom to share the story. And finally, they would be encouraged to share the story with someone from outside the

faith community. If it made sharing the story easier, they could introduce the story with: “Hey, I have this assignment. . .”

Had I to do *this* project again, the small group would be the priority. However, had I to do *any* project again, it would be one more suited to this particular congregation, such as preaching to build unity or preaching to shape a people. This work would have been exciting and more immediately relevant in this congregation. However, any project involving preaching at this point *in this call* was going to have challenges.

The congregation has been through decades of conflict and disruption, most of it generating from the lead pastor’s office. Understandably, they have been slow to trust a new pastor. It is the first time as a pastor that I haven’t enjoyed an early experience of a high level of trust. The hesitancy to trust a new pastor profoundly impacts the dynamics of and possibilities for preaching. As I said earlier, I was only nine months into my call at the latest possible date to start a sermon series. A significant part of my experience with this project has been shaped by the deep complication of changing calls mid-degree and the impact that has on preaching.

### **The Survey**

As stated earlier, I am deeply grateful to Dan Anderson for advice and wisdom in assembling the questions for the survey. While my project did not achieve the results I hoped for, I learned a great deal about my congregation from the surveys. And while imperfect, I believe a survey that teaches us something is a survey worth doing.

Surveys are a contested tool for use in a congregation. When one does a survey that allows people to suggest ideas and programs, one runs the risk of disappointing those

whose suggestions don't show up in the next slate of programs. But surveying people to learn what they think, I feel, is often fruitful. To that end, the surveys were a success.

The identifying questions were helpful and necessary if one wants to compare the before and after answers of a single person. The ability to directly compare before and after answers of a single person is even more important when overall survey response numbers are small. Any kind of identifier would work but, because people have to remember which question they answered, I wouldn't offer a choice as I did (between mother's maiden name and name of their first pet). Instead, I suggest using a single identifier plus month and year of birth.

The demographic questions were also helpful, even if only to affirm that those who answered the questions are, demographically, the most likely to read newsletters and be in worship. This invites some creative thinking about how to communicate and engage with our younger members in such a project. Once reached, they generally appreciate being asked and are eager to share their opinions. One might consider aD. Ministering the survey via a Facebook event, text messaging, Twitter, or Instagram. The survey would have to be adaptable to a mobile interface, as those younger than baby boomers are more likely to read a newsletter or take a survey on their phones than on their computers. This may also be true of those who prefer to access personal email away from the workplace. Most congregational communication goes to personal email addresses, which is increasingly more likely to be accessed on a mobile device.

It also occurs to me that some sort of incentive for taking the survey might increase participation (with IRB approval, of course). From coffee to candy or even a sticker, people tend to respond favorably to receiving some type of reward or treat for

completing a survey. This year, during our stewardship drive, people received an “I pledge” sticker when they pledged, which many proudly wore to worship. There was no real personal gain, just a sticker, but it was surprisingly engaging and fun.

It seems that, demographically speaking, the vast majority of people who took the surveys also populate the pews on Sunday mornings, read the online newsletter, and are willing to engage in an online survey. It’s worth noting that our sermons have long been available online, so being present at worship isn’t a limiting factor.

It comes as no surprise that early stage baby boomers, who made up the largest group of survey respondents, and late stage baby boomers, who made up the second largest, are technologically adept and regularly read newsletters, even online.

One satisfying aspect of the survey was the set of questions about what Christians “should” talk about: their faith, God or Jesus, their experience of God, or their church. The responses affirmed my suspicion that we hold deeper convictions about the necessity of talking about our church than we do about talking to others about God, or even about our own faith. This was useful in that it affirmed some beginning suppositions and encourages that preaching to shape witnesses and supportive programming should continue as we move into the future.

There are several things I would suggest doing differently with such surveys. First, I wish I had asked a question about what would make it *easier* to talk about one’s experience of God. Some did provide that perspective in the question: “Please feel free to share whatever you like about the idea of talking with others about your experience of or with God? Motivations, fears, etc.”

Perhaps it would have been wise, in lieu of a small group, to interview a small group of people. As part of the interview, one could ask imaginative and encouraging questions: “If you could find the courage and the words, whom would you most like to tell about God?” Or a more specific version of a question I did use, such as “What is your biggest obstacle to talking about God?”

Jesus demands quite a lot of his disciples: Be salt, be light, heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead. And yet modern disciples worry a great deal about offending people or “pushing their faith on someone.” Jesus didn’t push faith but he did offend regularly. So a survey or, better, an interview including questions about what respondents think Jesus would expect of us in the way of witness would be interesting to pursue.

I would suggest improving the survey with a subset of questions asking respondents *why* they answered some of the questions the way they did, by adding a simple “why or why not” as a follow up question. For example, it would be interesting to know why so many respondents were less sure that a Christian should talk about their *faith* but were more sure that a Christian should talk about their *church*. Although this didn’t surprise me—being the impetus for exploring witness in the first place—I would have liked to hear why they believe this. This would have helped direct the content of the sermons as well.

Along those lines, there were a few people that answered “Not Sure” when asked if they had ever had an experience of God. Because many of us are not sure, it would have been wise to ask them: What about the experience makes you think it might have been an experience of God? What about the experience makes you doubt that? One suggestion might be to couple this kind of question in the pre-survey with clearer

emphasis in the sermons that each person's experience of God is going to be very particular to that person. This may have opened listeners' imaginations for what is and has been possible in their own lives.

My surveys were simply used to measure thinking and attitudes before and after the sermon series. If a researcher wanted to use the results of a pre-survey to shape the sermons, it would be useful to do the pre-survey farther ahead of the sermon series. This would give the preacher enough time to study the results and then craft a sermon series that responds more directly to what is discovered. Using interviews would have been helpful in this regard as well and would need to be conducted in a similarly expansive timeline.

As I reflect on this Action → Reflection model of project, it might be helpful to have added one extra cycle of reflection, along the lines of:

Pre-interviews/survey → Reflection, Preach, Post-interviews/survey → Reflection.

The simple style of this project perhaps didn't create as many opportunities for successful results as an extended study might have. Although, each Sunday I pray that the Holy Spirit will speak through my words and open the ears of the listeners to hear whatever God desires for them. Therefore, I remain hopeful that the sermon series bore fruit in ways not necessarily measured by this project.

While I was quite happy with 54 respondents to the pre-survey, it was disappointing to have only 14 respondents complete the post-survey. Upon review, both surveys should have gone out in a special electronic newsletter, not buried in the normal weekly newsletter. We work hard at not inundating people with communication, and I am



reluctant to use an added newsletter to serve what feels like my own purposes. However, as the goal of this project was to encourage God's people to share God's story, perhaps it would not be too bold to send an extra electronic newsletter!

In addition, a special e-newsletter might have captured more attention as readers would not have been distracted by the myriad other "pushes" and "pulls" in the weekly letter. Better publicity of the post-survey or even offering the post-survey as a paper option in worship might have increased participation. But I am mindful that people also need time to think and reflect on what they have heard in a sermon before responding.

In Ronald Marriott's D. Min. project, his control group mentioned at several points that they hadn't yet had time to execute the action step issued in the sermon. Therefore, choosing just the right date to issue a paper follow-up survey would be a challenge. In fact, a paper post-survey might increase the numbers of those who respond only to the post-survey, which is not quite as useful as a respondent who completes both surveys.

Perhaps the optimal idea would have been to figure out how to capture the contact information of the respondents to the pre-survey and send them an email with a link to the post-survey. Then one could again explain the importance of responding to both surveys for the purpose of the project. It hadn't occurred to me to plan ahead for such a contingency. That is an idea I would pass on to all who do such a project in the future.

### **The Sermons**

As already discussed, the addition of small groups or interviews and the timing of the pre-survey could have better supported the sermons in accomplishing my goals. Still,

overall, I was satisfied with the sermons both as “regular” sermons and as sermons geared to the project purpose.

In retrospect, I learned from personal reflection that I was too subtle about promoting the series and too subtle about the series being intended to accomplish something. It would have been helpful to be more explicit with the listeners about what I had hoped to accomplish through these sermons. This could have been during announcements, in the bulletin, in general “publicity,” and in the sermons themselves. Something like: “Remember, we are in a four-week series about how preaching might help you be more comfortable/inspired/excited about sharing your experience of God.” This certainly would have shaped the listeners to be alert to something particular in the sermon.

In February 2017, I preached a sermon that would have been the perfect kick-off to this series. As I had already preached it, I didn’t want to preach it again. In retrospect, I could have and perhaps should have at least repeated part of that sermon. This sermon told the story of Suzanne, with which I opened this paper, and clearly articulated the difference between talking about church and talking about our experiences of God. I have included that sermon in the appendices.

#### First Sermon—Genesis 1:1-2:4

This sermon was designed to articulate that God is active in the world and that we are part of that activity. I am satisfied that goal was accomplished. What I could have done differently would be to ask the listeners to think about a creative activity they enjoy or something they are good at, and then invite them to ponder if this activity might be one of the ways God is active in their lives or through which they are partnering with God.

This exercise could inspire and encourage as well as show the listener that not only are experiences of God possible, but they are part and parcel of being woven into God's creation. The sermon could have invited the listener to imagine something as foundational as the particular way in which they are partnering with God. This might inspire confidence in the listener about how to talk with someone about such an idea.

#### Second Sermon—Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23 & 28:10-17

In this sermon, I model talking about my experiences of God with the intent to give credence to the possibility that we can experience God and to show how one might tell that story.

I am mindful of two things as I reflect back on this sermon. First, Marriott, Scott, and others chose to give quite specific suggestions in their sermons as to what they wanted their listeners to do. In general, to call for an action step is more common in their evangelical tradition. I could have taken a page from them.

One of the people who took my post-survey said: "I have had many experiences where God was front and center with me and sometimes I feel like I'm boasting when/if I share. I was actually looking forward to a more concrete encouragement during the sermon series but either I missed it or it wasn't that clearly done." Due to the glitch in this question on the post-survey, I don't know if this person heard this particular sermon. In any case, it's a fair point and worthy of deeper reflection.

There are times when I avoid calling for simple actions steps in my sermons because I avoid being overly directive. I fear boiling my sermon down to a single thought, which feels limiting and prescriptive to the listener. However, upon reflection, it

would be worthwhile from time to time to offer single messages and even action steps, especially if one plans to build on those ideas week by week.

The second thing that comes to mind was a wonderful idea on Marriott's part: His six-week sermon series included an action step for each week. He began by having each participant select a "lost" person to pray for. Then each week they took the "next" step: They were to tell the person they were praying for them, ask them for particular prayer concerns, share a time God answered prayer in their own life, share their faith, and invite the person to church.<sup>2</sup> The best part of this project was that Marriott himself chose a couple in his neighborhood and followed the steps along with his participants. During my project, I myself did not seek an opportunity to bear witness about God's activity in my life outside of what I shared in sermons. While I have told my stories many times, to actively do so during the project would have allowed me to better imagine the immediate obstacles faced by the listeners. I could have shaped the sermons accordingly.

I closed this sermon with: "It is *our* turn to bear witness. To tell *our* stories. Stories of God's big promises. Promises with skin on them. Stories of God's inexplicable persistent presence and activity in *our* lives. Thanks be to God. Amen."

The question is whether using the first person is too passive. It may have been more effective for the purposes of this project to say: "It's *your* turn to bear witness. To tell *your* stories. Stories of. . . *your* lives."

Pastors and worship leaders use up a great deal of oxygen debating when and why to use "you" versus "us/we." We debate this regarding the words of forgiveness

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Wayne Marriott, "Motivating Christians Toward Personal Evangelism Through Preaching from Selected Passages in Luke and Acts."

following the confession. Benedictions use both “you” and “us.” My husband has been encouraging me to use the first person in our invitation to the table, finding it more hospitable. There are pastoral moments when saying “you” is important. And “we” puts the pastoral leader alongside the listeners. It is challenging to discern what is most effective, authentic, and prophetic.

Perhaps a sense of being new and not having yet developed the social capital to be as bold as I can be got in my way. But in this sermon, to use the second person “you” might have accomplished two things. First, it would have been a stronger exhortation to the listener that they, too, *are* impelled out with their stories and that they have a vital role in helping the world hear the good news of a God whose promises have skin on them. Second, it would have made the statement that I, their pastor, believe that God is persistently present in their lives and that they have had experiences of God. That might have been an important and powerful pastoral act and affirmation.

### Sermon 3—Romans 3:21-31 (Sola Fide)

In this sermon, I spoke about the life-giving narrative that shapes us all and directly instructed people to tell the story.

Rather than leaving them to figure out how to tell the rather complex story of the freedom of the Christian, I might have helped them see that part of our freedom is celebrating the unique ways in which we each experience God and our capacity to share that story without having to self-justify. My intent was that they simply tell their own story, but that gets a bit lost in this sermon.

I may be getting hung up on my own resistance to being too prescriptive and simplistic by suggesting precisely what to “go and do” in my sermons. As mentioned

above, one of the respondents to the post-survey said: “I was actually looking forward to a more concrete encouragement during the sermon series but either I missed it or it wasn't that clearly done.”

This congregation is made up of well-educated, middle- to upper-middle class folks with big jobs and significant personal power. But that doesn't preclude them from being hungry for more basic faith formation and training in the practices of discipleship and witness.

In my first call, I led two women's Bible studies: a daytime study attended mostly by women who were home raising kids and an evening study attended by women who worked outside the home. We often used the same study in both groups to increase the likelihood of Sunday morning conversations.

Both groups were well-educated and intelligent. But the morning group was more engaged and the conversations so rich we often had trouble getting through all the material in our 90-minute gatherings. The evening group was quieter, so the study was more presentation than conversation. As a result, the women seemed less engaged and would get through the material in about 45 minutes.

I began to worry that the evening group wasn't interested in the material. Yet they kept showing up. So I asked them about it. As we talked, it became clear that they were hungry for Bible study, faith formation, and ways to live out their faith. So they showed up tired after a long day at work. They didn't have as much energy to contribute as the day time women did. But they were just as hungry. As one of the women said: “Just pour it in, Pastor Chris. Just pour it in!”

I tell this story perhaps more as a reminder to myself that even leaders of industry come to church hungry and a basic meal may be more sufficient than I imagine.

#### Final Sermon—Hebrews 4:14—5:10 (Solus Christus)

As I said in the previous chapter, there was too much to accomplish in one sermon: sermon series, Reformation Sola Series, and stewardship. And the sermon series suffered for it.

And so I repeat myself: A more effective approach may have been to encourage people to let their lives *and* their mouths speak. It would have been helpful to flesh out how telling our stories is one of the ways we bear the kingdom. As a sermon goes, this is not my favorite. And it is the least successful for this series.

#### Summary of the Sermon Series

While there are things to be learned from every preaching experience, the most significant things I learned from this series are as follows.

**Don't try to do too much.** A focused Lenten series, as originally hoped for, would have given more attention to the objective of this series. Even then, I would have preferred to preach it on Sundays in Lent, versus Wednesdays, as the Lenten tradition in this congregation fell by the wayside in the last 7-8 years. And I would argue that those who show up for a Wednesday evening worship are already more inclined than the average listener to be receptive to new ideas and action suggestions. In addition, there are more hearers on Sundays and thus more potential for getting *more* voices and *new* voices to tell their stories.

**Be prescriptive, as necessary.** This is an ongoing challenge for me. I am not sure why. I know that I personally don't like hearing sermons that tell me precisely what to do. In part that is because too often those sermons have been simplistic and twee. If it feels too easy, treacly, or sentimental, I resist. (My sister had a preacher who ended every sermon with an urgently whispered: "*So what are you going to do about it?*") This could well be to my own detriment. I so rarely get to listen to other preachers in situ that it's hard to do an objective self-check.

There have been times when I have been very clear about a hoped-for action outcome. I preached a sermon about the amendment to limit marriage in Minnesota. I have preached about voting as part of our Christian vocation. I have preached in support of the Safe Harbor law. But clearly, in these sermons, there was ample opportunity to offer more guidance for how to go from the place of worship and live out discipleship in particular and identifiable ways. Perhaps I might think about it as equipping them with a series of possible actions steps from which they could choose. To equip, rather than direct, is offering pastoral support, encouragement, and care rather than telling people what to do.

### **Congregational Engagement**

In spite of a disappointing response to the post-survey, the congregation has been very supportive of this project. This has been a surprising highlight not only of the project but of the degree itself. Both congregations have taken a lively interest in my course work and in the sermons preached as post-residency assignments. Assembling a Parish Response Group at my first congregation was very easy as I had been there long enough to know where the vital feedback would come from. While that was harder to discern in a



new congregation, those that I invited to be my new PRG were eager and willing. One quickly volunteered to be our note taker and reporter. The others were very engaged in the conversations before and after the sermons. In both cases, I invited at least one retired preacher to be part of the PRG, and I recommend that where possible.

Congregation engagement is part of why it was disappointing that I couldn't assemble a small group to work together as part of the project. In spite of that failure, the congregation inquires frequently about the degree, what I am learning, and if I am enjoying myself. They were very interested in the residency coursework and what we were studying. When I announced that I was leaving for a two-week writing retreat in January to focus on drafting my thesis, they were filled with congratulations and reached out with prayer support, encouragement, and good humor. I contend that congregational engagement and support is a critical component of this degree and of the project.

Another aspect of the project that went particularly well was the engagement of the staff, particularly worship and communication. First, keeping the staff apprised of the project content, timing, and expectations meant they were able to be engaged and supportive, offering suggestions and support. It also alerted them to changes in my schedule and availability, meaning no unhappy surprises.

Additionally, anything that impacts preaching, impacts worship. And worship impacts our decisions in faith formation. This was a significant factor in deciding to follow the scheduled readings for the Sundays of the series: In our congregation, Children's Faith Formation programming is shaped by what we are reading in worship.

The worship team was actively engaged in helping make the decision about preaching texts. Once we decided to use the assigned texts from the Narrative Lectionary

and Reformation Series, they asked for more insight into the content of the sermons so that hymns, prayers, and special music could be crafted or selected to support the preaching theme as much as the Biblical text. Now that we as a congregation are back to letting scripture shape our worship, the worship team is revitalized. They enjoy letting assigned Bible texts shape their decision making and tend to adhere to the text as closely as possible.

The communication director was helpful in testing the survey. She works daily with our internet communications and understands how our communications are received. She also did a nice job of making the survey not only appear fun for members to participate in but also as a way to be helpful to their pastor. Although I would use the electronic newsletter differently in the future, I am grateful for her wisdom and help.

The final part of this evaluation is to reflect on the importance of communicating some kind of final outcome or report of the degree and the project to the congregation. A congregation invests time, energy, money, and their pastor's time in the pursuit of this professional and academic degree. It serves the relationships and their future support of such undertakings to keep them updated along the way and at the close of three years of intensive academic work. As of this writing, how a final report will be made has not yet been determined.

## CHAPTER 7

### REFLECTION

The goal of this project was to equip and empower people to tell the story of their experience of God. The hoped for outcome was that members of the congregation I serve would more effectively communicate what it is to be part of the particular place of belonging that is the church and the liberation of knowing God. The ultimate goal was further dissemination of the Gospel and a growing Body of Christ. Although growth of the church was not measured in this project, we will trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to work through our faithful, imperfect human efforts.

#### **The Value of the Project**

A great gift of the project was the opportunity to learn more about my new congregation. Much of each week is taken up with the tasks of pastoral leadership rather than pastoral care. Our staff and congregation are large, so the tasks are many. My project required taking time to pay attention to who is in the congregation on a Sunday morning and to learn what they think about being a Christian and our call to bear witness to the Gospel.

There were things I learned about the congregation that did not surprise me. For example, I was not surprised to learn that more people believe Christians should talk about their church than about their faith or about God. Nor am I surprised to find modest

affirmation that people believe *living* one's faith is more important than *talking* about it or that they are reluctant to foist their beliefs on others. It is my observation—affirmed by comments in the surveys—that people are often reluctant to tell their own story of God or faith due to uncertainty about another person's faith status. While that can result in silencing witness, it is nevertheless stirring how many members—either as part of the survey or in conversation—articulate deep regard for the religious expression and life experience of other people. It is good news that people are in relationship with those from other faith experiences or no faith experience. And, on the other hand, it was inspiring to see in the responses that some members *do* believe telling others about God is important, even imperative.

### **Too Lutheran?**

While openness to the religious experience and expression of others is a good thing, the downside can be reluctance to articulate hope and confidence in one's own religious tradition. While this is not true of all members, it is true of many with whom I have spoken since becoming pastor of this particular congregation. For reasons stated earlier in this thesis, articulating a clear, confessional Lutheran theology has historically been construed as being less welcoming by some congregation members and leaders.

As I neared my first anniversary as pastor to this congregation, one active member asked to speak with me. "Tom" attends worship regularly, serves in leadership, and is active in various social and learning events at church.

He began by saying he had no intention of leaving the church. But he expressed concerns that perhaps I am "more Lutheran" than he was accustomed to. He wondered if that meant that he would have to find a way to be at peace with having "a theological

disconnect” with his pastor. He was genuinely curious to learn why I am “so Lutheran” and what that means to me.

I shared with Tom that the Jesus I see through the lens of Lutheranism is the most inclusive and expansive Jesus. I also suggested to Tom that being clear about what we believe and don’t believe doesn’t make us unwelcoming. In fact, we can be perceived as more trustworthy by being clear rather than being vague and hard to pin down.

In the end, Tom was relieved because he had been worried that being Lutheran gave me a narrow theological worldview. He had come to believe that being less Lutheran was to be more inclusive. Understanding a bit more about my deep commitments to Lutheran confessional theology as I understand it helped him see how that could be welcoming and inclusive. And he was content with that.

Tom does not speak alone. However, even as this congregation strives to make all welcome, I believe we must have a sense of what we are about, what we are inviting people to experience, and who we are inviting them to meet. As I read the array of responses to the open-ended questions in the survey administered in this thesis project, it strengthens my resolve—which I hope is a faithful resolve—to ground our worship in scripture and in the Lutheran confessional tradition. By doing so, my hope is that people will experience the God we know in Jesus Christ and the abundant grace in which we are washed. Being able to clearly articulate our theological commitments can create a spirit of openness and inclusion for those seeking community, a sense of the holy, solace, forgiveness, healing, affirmation, and vocation. Whereas by polite silence we might miss an opportunity to introduce others to God.

The impact this has on preaching is clear. Moving into the future, I will renew my commitment to and proficiency in biblical preaching because:

- Biblical preaching grounds a congregation in Scripture and can ground them in Lutheran theology. (Or the theological commitments of the denomination to which they adhere. See next paragraph.)
- Biblical preaching is a powerful tool for building trust between a preacher and a congregation.
- Biblical preaching gives the preacher and the listener a shared foundation on which to base conversations.
- Biblical preaching can be very welcoming to the seeker.

While it was not part of the stated aim of the project, a key learning of this project and from my first year in ministry at this congregation has been this issue of clear theological commitment. Theological clarity may actually increase the likelihood of witness for a couple of reasons. First, it shapes a worldview that attunes us to particular ways for God to be present in the world. For example, a clear proclamation of God's expansive grace might open a person's eyes to the presence of God in an uncommon act of hospitality.

Secondly, theological clarity can help ground a person in a faith that is authentic and nameable. If being open to others requires a lack of clarity about oneself and one's belief, we risk being wishy-washy and untrustworthy and, worse, being subsumed by someone whose theological claims are more assertive and well-articulated than our own. There is no desire here to create winners and losers. Rather, the goal would be to create self-differentiated, resilient people who are able to make a claim that is clear and

authentic. Such people could articulate a faith that is stout enough to withstand the daily reality of their lives.

In addition to a renewed commitment to biblical preaching, it is also my aim moving forward to continue to model witness in person and in the pulpit as well as to pursue opportunities for members to learn and to practice witness through Bible study, small group practices and even the way we open meetings. It is clear from this project that this is a skill that must be taught more experientially.

### **To Move or Not to Move**

I have said enough about the challenge of changing calls in the midst of this work. Another member of my cohort had quite the opposite experience from mine. She found liberation in moving from a call with no staff and minimal lay engagement to a larger call with a small staff and a great deal of lay engagement. There is no single word of wisdom about changing calls in the midst of this work.

However, I would caution any D. Min student considering a change of call to keep a couple of things in mind:

- Their own capacity to manage change.
- The comparative demands of the new congregation.
- The appropriateness of a previously chosen project for a new congregation
- The degree of trust necessary to accomplish their project's aim.

It was in this final consideration that my move may have most significantly impacted the project.

The degree of trust established at my prior congregation was high. Additionally, the small congregation and sanctuary allowed for a greater intimacy in preaching. I knew

every member, and our physical proximity in worship enabled a deep sense of connection between leaders and worshippers. In my new congregation, I don't know everyone and wonder if it is even possible. The sanctuary is huge, seating approximately 600 people. People sit all over the nave. Some are so far away I cannot clearly see their faces or read expressions. Some will listen to the sermon online rather than in person. It is a profoundly different preaching experience and set of relationships.

Persuading someone to tell their story about God takes a great deal of trust between the one doing the persuading and the one(s) being asked to tell their story. Perhaps another topic or type of project would have not been so impacted by the change in call. There is no way of knowing to what extent the discoveries of this project were impacted by my being new, but the importance of trust remains a key learning of the project.

This raises two possible areas for further reflection or study. First, it would be interesting to study the impact of trust in the preacher on the effectiveness of preaching. Intuition would tell us it matters but it would be fascinating to discover to what extent and in what ways it matters. For example, perhaps the preacher is not trusted but still preaches faithful, engaging, Gospel-centered, and theologically sound sermons. How does trust impact the hearing of such fine sermons? Can we measure the power of the Gospel to transcend imperfect relationships between preacher and hearer?

A second area to consider would be the impact of a preacher who does not yet trust the congregation. Because of positive prior experiences, I entered this congregation ready to trust. However, when I discovered that they were understandably not ready to trust the new pastor, I found that my reaction was an unfamiliar reserve in trusting them.



Questions to pursue might include: How did my lack of full trust impact my preaching? Was the trust I felt from some members enough to override such an impact? Is it sufficient in the early stages of a new pastor/congregation relationship to trust God's capacity to work in faithfully prepared sermons? Do we trust God to speak through the preacher's reserve created by a lack of trust? It's such a complex set of circumstances that the questions are difficult to articulate clearly.

It is important to point out that my new congregation has been every bit as supportive of my D. Min. work as my prior congregation. They are engaged in and supportive of the thesis process. The education level is high and many members have Master's degrees and doctorates. They have been generous, encouraging, and funny in telling their own stories about writing and defenses, which brings me to another subject for further reflection.

When I was in discernment about taking a new call at a large church, I spoke with a mentor about Facebook and social media. He said that it is important to create opportunities for the congregation to get to know their pastor because it is harder to build relationships in such a large congregation than in a smaller congregation. He suggested Facebook as a way to accomplish this.

I took my friend's advice and began accepting friend requests from members of the congregation. (I never initiate friend requests to members of the congregations I serve or have served.) The result is that members are able, if they choose, to follow the progress of the thesis as I post frustrations and accomplishments on Facebook. Which raised the question: What if one were to use Facebook as a supplement to preaching? One

could use Facebook posts to explore the importance of bearing witness and invite people to tell their stories of their attempts to do so.

### **I Remain Convicted**

I remain convicted that Christ's church needs witnesses to the reality of God among us. I remain convicted that the task of encouraging people to bear witness to their experience of God is vital: for their own faith, for the sake of those new to the Gospel, and for vibrant growth of the church.

As I move about my congregation, attend political caucuses and gun violence rallies at the capital, and encounter people in my own daily life, it is clear that White Christian America, if it ever was, is no more. Many people don't know what church is.

My generation and those older than me share with one another the worry: will our (grand)children have faith? Without witnesses to the activity of God in the world, the answer will probably break our hearts. Young people who have a vague idea or no idea of church can still be captivated by a personal story about a lived experience that transcends the day-to-day. Young people may not fuss about official membership but they care deeply about belonging and meaning. Witnesses to the living God have the capacity to connect them to both.

As I pay attention to the conversations among members, participants, and staff, the assertions I made in my opening chapter are further affirmed. We have many people connected to our congregation—some members, some not—who “check the box” of Sunday School and confirmation for their children but don't attend worship with them. Many who participated in Sunday School and confirmation will circle back to the church to marry and baptize. But then they don't attend worship or Bible studies. Many will use

the church for weddings, as it is conveniently located near many reception venues, but the couple often doesn't care much who officiates.

We must be willing to make some theological claims and tell our own stories if we hope to invigorate the role of the church in the community and more deeply connect those in the church—and community—to God. Even if the only claim we make is that the Creator God made us to be partners in God's good creation, we see the love of that God through Jesus Christ, and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit with gifts and talents to partner with that God. It needn't be more complicated than that.

### **Hungry, Reluctant Witnesses**

After the Parkland, Florida school shooting in February 2018, I preached about our call to act in the name of life for our children. The congregational response was overwhelmingly positive and members continued to respond for weeks with emails, phone calls, and narthex conversations. One woman overheard someone say: "The next thing you know, she (meaning me) will have us out there *doing* stuff. I guess that will be okay."

The positive response to this and to another recent sermon that spoke to a political reality in our community has demonstrated that members of the congregation I serve are hungry for ways to connect faith to life and to discern God's call to act in a hurting world. We in leadership speak often about the difference between giving food to hungry people and working to defeat the systems that keep them hungry. But initially members seemed somewhat reluctant to act in ways that could be construed as "political," which justice work is so often labeled. Our congregation has a long history of "doing good" and serving our neighbor. But speaking our faith as personal witness to a living God or as

political action is relatively new territory. It was instructive to see how people responded to sermons that suggested alternate ways to put faith in action. There is a deep hunger to *act* like people of God and a growing interest in doing more than acts of kindness. But we still have a way to go in *speaking* like people of God.

As we engage the rich narrative of scripture, we can find parallels in our world for those in the Gospels who are reaching out for healing and calling out for God. We can find ourselves among the crowds seeking an alternate narrative to violence, greed, deception, and misused power. Belonging to another club will not sort that out. And so this thesis comes full circle.

This project did affirm, at least for this preacher, that the church must make a claim much more enduring and faithful than that of being the best club in town. We must learn to tell our stories and bear witness to our own experiences of God and among the faithful. By telling our stories, we help each other and our neighbors connect to God through the Body of Christ and encourage one another in lives of faith that help cast a new and life-giving narrative into the world.

### **As Long as I'm Contributing to the Graduate Degree Process. . .**

While I was tucked away at my sister's cabin, writing this thesis, I received a Facebook message from a high school friend with whom I have had almost no contact since we graduated four decades earlier. Having written a dissertation himself, he wrote words of encouragement. I responded with thanks and mentioned the great support I was receiving from friends, family, and especially our cohort. He wrote:

Glad that you are doing well. One of the only times I have been more than a little sharp was when a grad student wrote in her thank you page that she essentially wrote her thesis and did her grad work by herself. As I pointed out with lots of

blue ink, NO ONE goes to or gets through grad school by themselves, and very certainly no one writes a dissertation by themselves. Ever. A cohort is essential as a supportive person/spouse/friend/family and esp [sic] a good advisor. Some things take almost more than a village. Time is always short no matter the planning and good intentions but it almost always does get done. Best to you.

The rubric for this section of the thesis asks us to “reflect upon the value of the project and its meaning and value for *the practice of ministry*.” I will end this reflection in gratitude for the people who walk the road with me. (Full acknowledgements are found in that section.) And I offer the observation that learning to ask for and accept support and help is the single greatest piece of advice I can offer to a future D. Min. candidate.

In truth, even if it also feels like a call, the pursuit of a degree feels a bit selfish to me. So in that pursuit, we try not to let the expectations and burdens of the work adversely impact those we love, those we serve, and those with whom we work. In planning the project, we work to make it inviting, an offering to the congregation rather than another demand on their limited and carefully parceled time. When recruiting the Parish Response Group, we are quick to be clear with those we are inviting about the maximum amount of time required, assuring them that once the coursework is complete, they have completed their service.

Ultimately, try as we might, our family, friends, cohort, advisor, staff, and members get carried along on the ride. Whether they find it fun, frustrating, inspiring, or confounding, those who populate our lives are part of every step of this journey.

So while I intended that this work not overly impact those I love, it has. And some have welcomed the opportunity to be part of the journey; some have been eager, in fact. So I learned to accept words of support, kindly asked questions, cups of coffee, bits of

advice, and reminders that everyday life can be heavy enough without adding the weight of a graduate degree.

The impact this has on ministry? We who carry titles like “Pastor,” “preacher,” “senior,” “lead,” “head of staff,” and so on are wise to remember that we are never those things all alone. Try as we might to be singularly heroic at worst or to avoid burdening others at best, we cannot go the pastoral—or doctoral—road alone. We never preach entirely alone. At the very least we bring listeners into the effort. But more so we bring all who have taught and shaped us, wise commentators, bloggers, and translators, witty friends and grandparents whose stories serve as entry points. And above all, we are accompanied by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit of Jesus who can make a Word out of a mess of words and transform a people through the vessel of our bodies and our voices.

After faith, humility may be the single most important skill in the preacher’s kit.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY RESPONSE DATA: SCALE

**Table 3: Part 1 of Survey Data**

Question	Agree		Slightly Agree		Not Sure		Slightly Disagree		Disagree	
	Pre-series	Post-series	Pre-series	Post-series	Pre-series	Post-series	Pre-series	Post-series	Pre-series	Post-series
Respond to this statement: God is active in the world.	87%	93%	7%	7%	2%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%
Respond to this statement: God is active in my life.	88%	100%	6%	0%	4%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%
Please respond to this statement: I believe/hope I COULD have an experience of/with God.	88%	100%	6%	0%	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Please respond to this statement: I believe/hope I HAVE had an experience of/with God.	78%	86%	15%	7%	7%	7%	0%	0%	0%	0%

**Table 4: Part 2 of Survey Data**

Question	Yes		No		Not Sure		Not Sure Have Had Experience	
	Pre-series	Post-series	Pre-series	Post-series	Pre-series	Post-series	Pre-series	Post-series
Have you spoken to anyone about your experience of/with God? *	75%	33%	15%	53%	6%	7%	4%	7%
Have you spoken to anyone about your faith? *	92%	64%	4%	29%	4%	7%	n/a	n/a

\*In the post-series survey, this question opened with, “During or after the sermon series. . .”

**Table 5: Part 3 of Survey Data**

Question	Agree		Slightly Agree		Not Sure		Slightly Disagree		Disagree	
	Pre-series	Post-series	Pre-series	Post-series	Pre-series	Post-series	Pre-series	Post-series	Pre-series	Post-series
Please respond to this statement: Christians should speak to others about their faith. **	58%	64%	37%	36%	7%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Please respond this statement: Christians should speak to others	59%	64%	33%	36%	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%



about God and/or Jesus. **										
Please respond to this statement: Christians should speak to others about their experience of/with God. **	57%	50%	32%	45%	10%	7%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Please respond to this statement: Christians should speak to others about their church. **	76%	77%	22%	23%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

\*\*In the post-series survey, this question opened with, “Following the sermon series. . .”

## APPENDIX B

### SURVEY RESPONSE DATA: ESSAY/FREE FORM

Open Responses to the Question: Please feel free to share whatever you like about the idea of talking with others about your experience of or with God? Motivations, fears, etc.

- I believe it is comforting when they are stressed.
- I have to wait for the right time.
- This is very tricky if one doesn't know the other person's belief or faith.
- It has always brought me closer to the people I share my faith with. Sometimes a busy life prevents me from having the time to share my experiences of my faith.
- The sharing of commonality, the connection made as we trust each other with our sacred experiences, and our willingness to share our vulnerabilities and joy and fears
- I'm a very private person, an introvert. However, I think sharing faith experiences is important and should be happening.
- I am afraid they will think I am crazy!
- I believe there are many faiths and belief systems and I am not comfortable imposing my faith on others. I expect that they can discern that I am a faith-filled person through my actions. Well, that is my hope anyway! So help me God.
- Very important to spread the word.

- It helps to get other peoples ideas and experiences.
- Easier to speak with other faithful people, fear of overwhelming others.
- Uncomfortable at times
- I admit to some hesitation about talking to others about my faith in part because i respect where others are in their faith journey and would never expect to ask someone to consider Christianity over being of another faith. Our history of evangelism is a struggle for me.
- In my experience people often share ideas about God, faith, Jesus, their experiences, fears, etc. based on prejudice, disinformation, biases, and a lack of knowledge about the Bible, Christian history, and church history.
- Enjoy talking with others I know feel the same as I do. Somewhat reluctant to share with those I know have differing feelings or whose feelings I do not know.
- I can hinder as much as help others' faith.
- I am not an evangelist, but when asked about faith issues I share mine.
- I feel we all need to have our own connection to Jesus—don't like to be preachy or pushy in this area because I don't wish to put others "off". This is likely because I'm not truly comfortable with my own relationship with Jesus—I believe in him but have not yet lived the life I want to live as a christian. Thank you
- I never want to sound like I'm pushing my ideas/faith on someone.
- I believe you should live your faith rather than talk about your faith.
- It's important not to exclude other faith traditions when we talk about God experiences as we eliminate the authenticity of God if we only focus on Christianity.

- Discussion with friends, not strangers
- Has to be a natural part of who I am. It's about life. Not about "pith helmets and conversion Christianity"
- It reaffirms my own faith and let's others know I am open to hearing their faith story
- fear of offending someone or alienating them.
- Disbelief that my experience is real
- Before becoming a true Christian I could easily be turned off by the way some Christians approached me. I will always share if and when the time is right. I do not wish to push people away. I.e. I was once asked, during a lively party, out of the blue if I believed in God and heaven. I answered immediately, "with all my heart and everything I am!" I learned that this man lost his daughter to illness years ago. I believe God uses us in our ways to share His love. For instance, in our early 30's my husband and I moved from Stillwater to Fl. We were involved with a very big man on campus group. We partied a lot and were in the lime lite a lot. One night a group of us were in a bar or nightclub and a stranger happened to be sitting next to me. He leaned into me and whispered, " I bet you know there is no God." I stopped what I was doing moved closer to him and told him about my faith and how it meant everything to me and how it was free for the asking . We talked for hours. My catholic upbringing got the better of me and I felt bad about discussing God in a bar. So I called Pastor John's ( he was minister of Trinity at the time) and asked him if what I'd done was ok !!! He wholeheartedly gave me a

thumbs up! To sum up, I won't push, but will not back down when the time is right.

- I believe that generally most people are more hesitant to talk about faith and church with others as in our society it is seen as such a personal issue
- I enjoy sharing and learning with others of different faith backgrounds, I am not confident in knowing all about the Bible and therefore feel unsure about publicly approaching people to discuss religion.
- God, Jesus, church is a central part of my life. Consequently, when I am sharing about myself with friends and family I talk about my life, including God, Jesus, and church.
- I want to be a part of God's entire world and all people. Many are uncomfortable if people speak about God and faith in any radical way.
- It is difficult to "put yourself out there"
- As a young child in grade school, I had been sick and in a dream or whatever it was I was suddenly drawn through a dark tunnel to a light at the end. Before I entered the tunnel I grabbed a new coat hanging in the bedroom. About half way through the tunnel I was suddenly thrown back. I have never forgotten the light I was being drawn to.
- My faith = my core values = me! Therefore I want to talk about my faith experiences. When I hold back it's because "Christians" can be / have been so harshly judging of others. I don't want to come across like that. Probably err on the side of caution, sadly.

- Talking and discussing are important in understanding my faith and the faith of others, whether Christian or not
- I believe sharing should be done in the context of what my faith means to me and encouraging others to explore their own perceptions and meaning.
- I think these conversations need to stem from a natural experience with the focus on the final audience. I often will refer to the fact that my faith and experiences with God are what allow me to focus on the 'good' pieces of life and the strength to get thru those times when things are not going as well.
- Not always easy. Best to live an example
- I need to respect the faith and/or beliefs of others as I hope they respect mine. I will share my faith if asked or if it seems appropriate.

## APPENDIX C

### FULL TEXT OF SERIES SERMONS

#### **Sermon 1: September 17, 2017**

Genesis 1:1-2:4—Trinity Fest

One year ago, yesterday, I stood across the street with two friends, admiring the tents that had been set up for last year's Trinity Fest. We had biked out along the Gateway and Brown's Creek trails to enjoy lunch along the river. I had not yet been chosen as the final candidate for your pastor. The interviews had all been completed and hopeful candidates were pending in prayer as we awaited word from the call committee.

As I stood with my friends in the shade of the brick wall, I pondered the sprawling celebration space. The tents signaled a hopeful church. A church of joy-filled possibility. A church unafraid of public proclamation.

Suddenly my friend Cindy said: "We're gonna pray. Right here. Right now!" My first -uncharacteristic—response was to flinch. What if someone saw me! Not praying. I didn't mind that. But what if someone from the call committee saw me here?! Would I look too confident? A little creepy? Or a little sad, like someone standing outside a party looking in.

But I banished the thoughts and Cindy prayed and now a year later, the sprawling celebration space still signals a hopeful church, unafraid of public proclamation and

ready to have fun together. It is an overwhelming gift and privilege to be under the tent with you this time, as we look to a future of joy-filled, kingdom-of-heaven possibility.

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As we celebrate the beginning of a new season together, we pick up the Narrative Lectionary again. In the Narrative Lectionary we start our worship readings in the fall with Genesis and follow the narrative arc of the Old Testament until Christmas time. After Christmas we move into the Gospel—this time John—until the resurrection appearances. Then we will hear from the early church next spring.

On this early fall day when the valley is refulgent with color, harvest and rain, we start at the very beginning. With the story of Creation. The wind across the face of the earth, the call and response of God, the establishment of cycles and rhythms, and the promise that creation contains within itself the capacity to come alongside God and stretch into the future.

Because the reading is so rich, John will read the passage again, throughout the sermon, as we reflect together on the powerful, ongoing activity of our Creator God.

**Reading: Genesis 1:1—5**

As a congregation we have borne the name Trinity for so long that I wonder if we use it without remembering the remarkable power and mystical, theological implications of the name.

In beginning, we meet our Creator Progenitor in the first words of scripture. Beginning, God created. The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the earth *while a wind from God* swept over the face of the waters. The wind from God. The ruah. The Spirit, the enlivening breath of God. And so we meet Creator and Spirit.



And then God said. God spoke a word. God spoke the Word.

The gospel of John begins this way: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life. . .”*

In beginning, we meet the mysterious Godhead, the three-ness of God, the Trinity: Creator, Word and Spirit. Collaborating, cooperating, communal, co-creating, speaking and moving and breathing life. Working in harmony they-God separate light and darkness, creating life-giving light through the power of the Word.

**Reading: Genesis 1:6—8**

The second day reveals the co-creative nature at the heart of they-God. God said, “Let there be a dome. . .” So God made the dome. God speaks and God responds. The call and response of God is the liturgy of creation. God speaking. God responding. Let there be. So God creates. Cooperative, communal, co-creating, speaking and moving and breathing life.

**Reading: Genesis 1:9—13**

By the close of the third day, God has separated light from darkness, the waters above from the waters below and the waters under the sky are gathered and dry land emerges. God has ordained the first laws; God has set the first boundaries to govern the chaos. Living things learn the boundaries within which they not only live but within which they will thrive.

And on this day we get the first glimmer that God—in creating—has woven into life the capacity for ongoing creativity and abundance: for God has called into being plants yielding seed, trees bearing fruit, fruit bearing seed with in it. Life within life. The living things, called forth by God’s liturgy, are fashioned to carry creation into the future.

**Reading: Genesis 1:14-19**

The creation liturgy continues. God speaks. God responds. They-God create lights in the sky not only to give light but to shape seasons and days and years. God creates boundaries that give rhythm to our lives; rhythms both gentle and unforgiving. Days and seasons and years are the heartbeat of God, steady and persistent, woven into creation. Creation is not God. But creation gives us windows into God, points to God, helps us see God’s intent for order and beauty and creativity. These rhythms and cycles remind us that God who ordered the planet, orders it still, never abandoning us. Sustaining us within the boundaries of light and time and the dance of the spheres; reminding us that God is ever present to us through the persistent drumbeat of the created order.

**Reading: Genesis 1:20—23**

Call and response. The creation liturgy again gives forth in riotous variety, creatures great and small, swimming in the deeps and soaring with the wind. Every living thing created by God to be creative, to be fruitful, to bring life from life.

Think about it for a moment. God did not simply create and set in motion. God created and within creation is the capacity to bring forth life. More than genetically-coded automatons. Yes, genetic codes are real and fascinating and productive. But they aren’t just computer programs that keep us chugging forward independent of God’s creative

intent. Nor are created beings mere puppets for God to manipulate. Living things are God's ongoing handiwork. God breathing through the cycles of life and the rhythms of reproduction. Drawing all living things alongside God in life-giving activity.

**Reading: Genesis 1:24—31**

God calls and God responds. The liturgy of creation. Creatures and creeping things—gentle and ferocious—populate the earth. A mind-boggling array of shape, size, color, furred and scaly, sounds from a whisper to a roar.

And then God does the craziest thing of all. God calls out: Let's make adam, human beings, in our likeness. In OUR likeness. The Mysterious Godhead, three-ness, community within oneness. Creator, Spirit and Word. God responds and in that image, we are created. ~~~~~

Like all creatures animated by the breath of God, we are fashioned for creativity. We too bear within us the seeds of life.

And here is where God's wildness, God's imagination, God's capacity to exceed our wonder becomes even more apparent.

We are created to create. Some of us will follow the physical rhythms and cycles of life and produce children. Some of us will not. But God did not limit human creativity to physical reproduction of offspring. In fact, I have wondered: when God created human kind, did God right at the start imagine our capacity for creativity?

Did God imagine that we would also create great works of art, build soaring cathedrals lit by rainbows of cut glass, invent lifesaving technologies, discover the protective quality of soap, and combine whispers and roars into songs and poems.

What did God think when the mind of J. K. Rowling birthed the world of Harry Potter or Martin Luther King dreamed a dream or Langston Hughes wrote: “I, too, sing America”?

Was God delighted and surprised by inventions like pianos and djembes. The printing press, the electron microscope.

The creative mind of a child is a wonderful place to see the breadth of God’s capacity to create creators. Sidewalk chalk becomes a welcome mat, a game board or plan to take over the neighborhood.

What about chocolate chip cookies, pot roast and pizza? We have been given every plant yielding seed and every tree with seed in its fruit for food. . . and we came up with apple pie and tacos and vegetable stew. And beer. Did God imagine what would be possible? Or did God’s imagination and our imagination come alongside one another in a beautiful liturgy of need and fulfillment, of commission and expression.

**Reading: Genesis 2:1-4**

The liturgy goes silent. The six days are finished. And God rests. God does not stop. God does not turn away from job well done. God rests. And then as we turn the page, God goes on with the work: calling and engaging human beings in God’s activity on earth. Inviting us into conversation and conversion. Collaboration, cooperation, community and co-creation.

God called. God responded. And it was good. It was so good.

And here we are, still shaped and sustained by the gifts and rhythms of creation. Held by a God of such love and imagination we could hardly draw breath were it not for the spirit of God breathing with us.

Friends, visitors, neighbors. What a gift you have been given. And what a gift you are. Created by the breath and word of God. Loved into being by the three-ness of our One God. Called into partnership with a God who is active and moving in our lives and in our world. The God in whom we live and move and have our being. Three-in-One. God with Us.

Happy Festival Day, Trinity Lutheran Church. God called you into being out of love and hope. A nearly 150 year old creative liturgy that still sings on. To God be the glory! Amen.

### **Sermon 2: September 24, 2017**

Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23 & 28:10-17

Yesterday, we hosted a wedding here at Trinity. It was beautiful. Candles lining the aisles. Extraordinary flowers. Happy families. A lovely young couple. They stood up here and bound themselves together in the covenant of marriage. They made promises to each other. Promises to be steadfast and true in sickness and health. Good times and bad. They promised forgiveness and faithfulness. They promised to love each other until they die. Big promises.

After 31 years of marriage, those promises mean something different to me now than they did on my wedding day. Because now I know what it takes to keep those promises. I know how good marriage can be and how hard. I know what sickness and

health actually look like. The deep blessing and disruption of children. And just how complicated it can be to navigate two sets of aging parents at the same time.

Big promises are made at a wedding. And over the course of time, those promises get skin on them. And they become lived out in real and tangible ways.

The story we read today is a story of promises broken and kept, big promises with skin on them. This is a story about the covenant God made first to Abraham. A promise to which God remains steadfastly committed despite apparent human incapacity to play nicely.

Isaac is the long dreamed of child of Abraham and Sarah. He grows into adulthood and marries. Isaac's wife Rebekah conceives twins who start tussling even before they are born. Jacob follows Esau from the womb, clutching his heel. Esau is outdoorsy, a man of the field and forest. Jacob is more of an indoor type. But he is not unambitious.

In Genesis 25, Jacob cons Esau out of his birthright—the inheritance and privilege of the first born—in exchange for a bowl of stew. Esau didn't recognize the import of what he had done. But Jacob knew. There was still a blessing to come with that birthright. With Rebekah's help, Jacob slapped some sheep skin on his hands and slid into home plate armed with a bowl of savory game stew, before poor, witless Esau could get the arrow nocked into his bow.

Jacob is a rather unsavory character. He is a trickster, a con man. He lives to serve his own aim. But things don't go well for Jacob after he gains his father's blessing. He is forced to flee for his life. Because Esau vows to kill him.

Nice family.

Jacob heads for the ancestral land of Haran, where he might find both safety and a Hebrew wife, according to his mother's wishes. Along the way, he grows weary. He apparently has little in the way of creature comforts with him and is forced to use a stone for a pillow.

But what a stone.

With his head at rest, Jacob has a dream. There is a ladder or a stairway extending from heaven to earth with angels ascending and descending. And suddenly the Lord is beside Jacob, the God of Abraham and Isaac. And God reiterates to Jacob the promise God made to Abraham.

“This land I will give to you and to your offspring, your offspring will be a multitude, in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” And then God expands the promise. God says: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Jacob, the trickster, the conman. The one who took advantage of his aged, blind father. It is to this man that the Lord pledges allegiance to the original covenant, the big promise. Jacob, the undeserving, Jacob, man on the run. Jacob blessed to be a blessing. And all his offspring with him.

Despite Jacob's failings, we have God's stalwart insistence on keeping the promise to Abraham. God's faithfulness in the face of human faithlessness and fussing and manipulation. God's faithfulness in promises, in dreams, in visions, God's inexplicable justification of the ungodly.

God's dogged, persistent presence and promise to act in the lives of stubborn people.

These is not just Old Testament whimsy. These stories were not simply created to make sense of life that was hard. These stories are the witness of a people. People who experienced God in very particular ways.

Their lives were really, really hard. Children often didn't survive to adulthood. Warring factions made a hard life even more dangerous. Violence, drought, famine. Perhaps such hardship made people more amendable to belief. Or maybe a life lived at a survival level is somehow less complicated, clearing the way for dreams and visions and opening hearts to God.

Whatever it was, here it is before us. This witness. Stories passed from parent to child, over thousands of years. "Here, this is what we experienced. This is what we saw and heard. This is what we know. This is our witness to the generations."

What then do we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century make of a stairway with angels ascending and descending and God standing shoulder to shoulder with an exiled con man. "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

20 chapters from now, Jacob will be on his deathbed, with his 12 adult sons gathered around him. And instead of one blessing, he will offer twelve. He will bless every last one of them. He begins his farewell speech with the words: "The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless the boys; and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude on the earth."



“ . . .the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all harm. . .” God kept the big promise and now at the end of his life, Jacob bears witness to God’s faithfulness. Jacob bears witness to God’s abiding activity and presence in his life.

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God’s faithfulness doesn’t end with the Old Testament fathers and mothers. God’s activity continued through the ages. Taking new forms and coming in different shapes depending on the need or the stubbornness of a people who swing from faithfulness to idolatry in a breath. Nevertheless, God persisted.

God persists even to this end of the ages when we see God’s presence in a new way. When Jesus becomes the embodiment of God’s promise to Jacob: I will be with you. In Jesus, we see a big promise with skin on it. In the gospel of John, Jesus himself says to the newly minted disciples: “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Jesus himself becomes the living witness to God’s persistent reach across the apparent gulf between heaven and earth.

Jesus becomes God’s persistence, God’s presence, God’s activity in our lives.

God in Christ continues to be and to act. Think for a moment about your own experience. Your own witness.

I have not had a dream. That’s not how God works in my life. God most often comes to me through the voices of people I trust. Offering words of assurance and affirmation when doubt threatens to overwhelm me. Crazy as it sounds, twice in my life I

have heard a voice just behind my right ear. Once was God telling me that I could, in fact, be a pastor. And the second at a time of confusion, telling me to just do what I had been called to do.

God was present in the prayers that physically lifted me up as I prepared to do the funeral of a 13-year-old who died by suicide. God was present in surprising kindnesses from unexpected places when our child was suffering.

When I was in the call process to come here—a call which meant we would have to leave our neighbors of 25 years and sell the house that saw our children grow up—I called the bishop and said: I feel called to Trinity. But I am not feeling the joy I expected. Where is the joy? The bishop said: Well, it's your third call and that's different. And it's a church that has been through a lot. It will be a challenge.”

It would be 5 more days before the call came from Arba-Della that I was the final candidate. She—well the whole call committee was on the phone—they reached me in my car, driving home from church on Wednesday evening. When she told me, my heart nearly burst, the joy ran through me like a flood. Not arrogance or a sense of victory. Pure, unmitigated joy, tingling all the way to my fingers and toes, tears came to my eyes. I probably should have pulled over. It took hours to come down. Joy. Pure gift rained down by our doggedly persistent God.

Friend, God is present and active in our world and in our lives. In all our lives. It is not a question of worth. Jacob was not worthy. Moses was not worthy. Ruth was not worthy. Mathew the tax collector was not worthy. Martha the busy one was not worthy. I am most certainly not worthy. None of us are worthy of a gift so great as the living presence of the God of all creation. Nevertheless, God persists.

God persists with promises that have skin on them. Promises to meet us at the font, at the table and in a hand extended in peace. Promises to meet us in prayer and in grief. Promises to meet us in our vocations and our relationships. Promises to meet us on a Wednesday night in the car driving down Highway 55.

We can, in all confidence, echo the words of Jacob and say: Surely, the presence of the Lord is in this place. In you. In your lives.

It is our turn to bear witness. To tell our stories. Stories of God's big promises. Promises with skin on them. Stories of God's inexplicable persistent presence and activity in our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.

### **Sermon 3: October 8, 2017**

Romans 3:21-31—Sola Fide—Reformation Series Part 2 of 5

This morning we are continuing our celebration of the reformation with the “Sola Series.” Last week Pastor Karri preached Sola Gratia—By Grace Alone.

This week we focus on Sola Fide—By Faith Alone. The solas are the mission statement of the Reformation. Grounded in the Word of God, Martin Luther wanted to strip away the excess of the church. A church that had, in his estimation, become shaped by greed and ambition; crushing the people Christ had come to serve.

Martin Luther returned to the Word and God's intent in Christ Jesus; grounding us in the simple truths of grace, faith, scripture and Christ.

It would have been interesting to know Martin Luther when the words of Paul and the gospel of John began to work their power in his mind and heart. As the scales fell from his eyes, the guilt from his heart, the shame from his shoulders. To be there as he discovered the freedom of the Christian to live humble lives of joyful praise and service.

On the other hand, it is too tempting to look back from the perspective of 500 years with a sense of indulgence; thinking what wise truths those might have been for a simpler time. Thinking that perhaps we need something different now, what with how complex our lives have become. And yet. . .

This morning we heard from Paul's letter to the church at Rome. No surprise that Paul is once again writing to a church divided, this time between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The Gentile believers were newcomers to stories of God; eager for the redemption, inclusion and liberty of the Gospel. The Jewish believers argued for adherence to the law; including circumcision and the holiness codes. Their faith in Christ was grounded on the heritage of a religious practice that went back generations.

Paul is writing into a culture of self-justification, writing to those who would claim to be justified by their obedience to the law. Paul reminds both Jewish and Gentile Christians that justification comes only through Jesus Christ and faith in what God has done through him. Paul reminds them that despite adherence to the law, ultimately, we have all sinned and we have all fallen short of the glory of God. The fulfillment of the law does not bring justification. Only God does that.

The words of Paul resonate in our current reality; because we too live in a culture of self-justification. A culture where we measure ourselves and others by standards that

we construct based on our own values and priorities: education, work ethic, political engagement, fitness, disposal of wealth and so on.

Facebook is one of our greatest tools for self-justification.

Just this week I got a friend request from a high school classmate I remember as funny and engaging. On Facebook, I discovered that we are dramatically different in the way we think about our country and the world political situation. I can handle that we think differently. Many of my Facebook friends think differently than I do. But Mark celebrates things I find offensive and he is very verbal about it.

My cousin is another one. We cannot agree on God's will for God's people. It is that foundational. And of course, I think I am right and he believes that his rightness is upheld by scripture. I had to stop following him on Facebook because he made me so mad.

I unfollowed both of them because I want Facebook to be fun, not irritating. Or perhaps I want to self-justify my rightness. With a single click of the mouse I can silence those in my Facebook feed that bug me or disagree with me. Creating my own narrative of what is right and wrong. Like the church at Rome.

And yet Paul reminds us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We are justified only by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ. This is just as shocking a narrative for us today as it was to the church in Rome. As it was to Luther.

We are not justified by our own measures. We are not closer to God because we meet some earthly standard, a standard often set by us in the first place. False standards for goodness and rightness that we let divide us. Dangerously so.

So I ask you this.

Do you ache for the renewal of a spirit of reconciliation in the world? Do you long for an end to divisiveness and acrimony? Do you want to get up in the morning and turn on the news with a heart ready to love and embrace all of God's people, regardless of their apparent wrongness; rather than being further justified in your outrage? What might happen if, rather than demonizing and excluding the "other", we remembered the even ground on which we stand before God?

Yes, there are people who do really bad things.

58 people are dead and nearly 500 wounded because a man took an astonishing array of guns into a hotel room and opened fire on human beings enjoying a concert 32 stories below him. People out for a good time. People with parents, spouses, children, siblings and friends. People with dreams and plans for tomorrow.

He did an indisputably bad thing. Our response has been to line up on the right and wrong side of gun control, personal freedom, hotel security, mental illness, gambling, access, ideologies and more. We scramble to self-justify. Distancing ourselves from the shooter because we believe in stricter gun control or because we think mental illness is to blame.

I know it's not quite that simple but if you read the papers, follow the news. . .it's as if a big black magic marker draws a line through issues like shootings and terror and politics and we are divided one from another. Each clinging to our own sense of rightness.

And yet all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All are justified by God's grace as a gift. Only by God's grace. Not by any effort or goodness or rightness of our own.

Which means we must see the humanity on both sides of a shooting, an act of terror, or in a politician or pundit who offends us. If we expect them to see and respect our humanity we must see and respect theirs. Because all have sinned. . .

Yes, we are called to speak truth to power, to set limits on behaviors that harm and to name abuse, violence, racism and misogyny when we see them. But we are not called to do so from a position of self-justification. We do it because live out of the faith that saves us. A faith that liberates us to liberate others.

This past week I have been asking myself. What is the narrative that shaped the thinking of that Las Vegas shooter? What truths was he telling himself as he made trip after trip up that elevator, building an arsenal with which to destroy tender human flesh and bone. Who told him those truths?

What narrative shapes the thinking of a teenager who dies by suicide? What narrative informs the young man who drives a truck into a crowd of shoppers? What narrative shaped the youth who walks into a classroom of friends and opens fire?

Our instinct is to quickly "other" them. We yearn to discover all the ways they are not us and we are not them, the ways we have been right and they have been wrong so that we can be assured that what happened to them cannot happen to us, to our sons, in our towns or in our schools.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

What is our alternative response? To lean into the redemptive promise of Jesus Christ. To embody the narrative of God's justice, God's righteousness. . .which is not obedient piety so much as simply falling at the foot of the cross in joy and gratitude that the work of justification is not ours to do out of a sense of moral superiority or obligation. Instead, justification comes through Christ and only through Christ. Even the faith that is in us, whether mountain or mustard seed, whatever faith is in us is not to our credit but a gift of the Spirit. It's all gift.

We are justified by the gift of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which works renewal in us, creating a fresh, surprising narrative to guide our lives; liberating us for humble lives of joyful praise and service. A word of hope that both Paul and Martin Luther were desperate for us to embrace.

A word of hope still desperately needed.

Just as all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, so are all people swept up in the reconciliation that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Our world, our country, our neighbors are aching for a new narrative, a new truth. And we who know Jesus have a story to tell. A story that can erase the black line of division. A life-giving narrative about a God of liberation, redemption, wholeness, belonging and equity. Hungry hearts are eager for the good news, the story that shapes us and has the power to shape our world. Go in peace today. And tell the story.

Soli Deo Gloria.

Amen.



**Sermon 4: October 15, 2017**

Hebrews 4:14—5:10—Solus Christus

There is a two-part process for entering seminary to be trained to be a pastor or a deacon. The first part is academic; getting accepted into the school based on college transcripts and so on. The second part is admission into candidacy for ordination; where it is determined if you are a sound candidate to be a pastor or deacon. That part involves a very long essay and an interview with your synod's candidacy committee.

Twenty years ago this month, we were about six weeks into classes when I met with the candidacy committee in a classroom in the Northwestern Building on the Luther Seminary campus. There were six of them: men and women; clergy and lay leaders. I was terrified because I was still surprised to find myself in seminary.

The interview went well enough. Most of the questions were about my sense of call, my faith story, how I grew up and so on. Then a large and imposing pastor squared his shoulders, looked at me and asked: "Why Christ? Why the theology of the cross?" He asked it like a dare.

I had never heard the phrase "theology of the cross" in my life. I had no idea what he was talking about. So I answered the first part "Why Christ?" as best I could. I have no memory of what I said. But I have clear memory of feeling like an idiot.

When the questions finally came to an end, I was asked to step out while they deliberated.

After what felt like an eternity but was probably only about ten minutes, they called me back in and told me that I had been approved for candidacy for ordination. And I promptly burst into tears.

It was a strange, funny and happy day.

But I came away with a question that I have been struggling to answer for 20 years. “Why the theology of the cross?”

First, I had to learn what the “theology of the cross” was.

It is, basically, Solus Christus. By Christ alone. And the revelation of God in the suffering and humility of the cross of Jesus.

Sometime contrasts help. The “theology of the cross” is in stark contrast to what was happening in the church in Luther’s time and what still happens in parts of the church today—that is, the “theology of glory.”

The theology of glory holds that God is revealed to us in glory, riches and beauty; that faithfulness is rewarded by material wealth and, similarly, that material wealth is a sign of God’s special blessing.

It is true, Lutherans agree that material wealth is not something we achieve on our own but through the wit, will and skill granted us by God. In fact, we believe that everything we have is a gift which finds its source in God.

But we do not believe wealth is a sign that someone is more blessed, more faithful or closer to God. The “theology of glory” would go so far as to say: the more you have, the more blessed you are, the more faithful you must be. And if you believe more, you will have more.

Instead, the “theology of the cross” upholds that it is in the cross that God is most fully revealed. Through the life, suffering and death of Jesus Christ we most clearly see who God is and who God is for us. And who we are to God. No longer cast down by our want, need or suffering; we are instead drawn into the very aching heart of God.

The book of Hebrews opens with beautiful and haunting words: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. . . He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.”

Jesus Christ is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being. Jesus Christ who lived as a working man, who walked long dusty miles with his companions, who laid his own hands on the sick and untouchable, who ate with outcasts; who was arrested, beaten, and executed. Nailed to a cross on the grubby, barren outskirts of town with common thieves and insurgents. One cross among hundreds.

This is the reflection of God’s glory. This is the imprint of God’s very being. This is the “theology of the cross”—Solus Christus—that God is revealed to us most clearly in the suffering and death of Jesus. That God is present to us in our own suffering in personal and particular ways. That God is present among those who have been thrown away by society, with those whose homes have been destroyed by fire, hurricane or earthquake. The theology of the cross moves God from the limits of great cathedrals and seats of power onto battle fields, into orphanages, among the street children and the potter’s fields with unmarked graves of the lost and forgotten dead.

Solus Christus. By Christ alone.

Yes, we can see God in the glory of the autumn colors in the valley and in the bounty of a supper table and in the beauty of children singing. Martin Luther never contested that.

But he stood firm against a church that had become a mighty machine, extorting money from the poorest of the poor to build the greatest cathedral of all time as a testament to the church's power, faithfulness and closeness to God. They had embraced the theology of glory; that wealth and grandeur signified God's nearness and blessing. The church leaders had lost their way and wielded the church for political power. Luther said no.

We live in a strange time. A time when the theology of glory has a central place in our public discourse, even among those who otherwise might not consider themselves people of faith. Too many see wealth and political might as signs of God's special blessing. Political leaders claim God's blessing as though it were a birthright based on geography.

Solus Christus. Our salvation comes through Christ alone. Christ on the cross. God revealed in suffering.

This isn't grim news. This is not a God revealed only in darkness. Instead, this is an inbreaking of that new narrative we talked about last week. God revealed in the cross is God coming as close to human beings as is possible. . .to feel with us, work with us, walk with us, love with us, celebrate with us, suffer with us. Even die with us. Imagine what a glorious revelation that was to a people being crushed by the greed of those in power, erecting edifices to their own egos.

Imagine what a glorious revelation that would be to our own neighbors. To those who have been told for too long, that who they are is a sin, that their lot in life is their own fault, that they are nothing more than the circumstances that limit their futures.

The proclamation of the theology of the cross—*Solus Christus*—is what we do here. That is the ministry we are called into by God. We bring the good news of the cross and the joy of being God's own beloved to those who most need to hear it. We gather to hear it for ourselves and be liberated by it; and liberated, we tell the story to liberate others. To be set free into fulfilling God's vision for the kingdom of heaven.

This week we start a time of reimagining how we support the mission of God at Trinity through our financial offerings. We reimagine how we come together with whatever we have to offer, and we ALL have something to offer, and how those shared gifts are put into service of bringing the good news of the liberating cross to each other, to our neighbors and our community. Because that is what we do.

We worship a God fully present to us, in and through all that life offers: the sublime, the sacred, the scary and the sad. We pass on the stories of Jesus to our children and grandchildren. Reminding them that they bear an indelible identity, marked by the cross, that nothing in the world can erase or overshadow. And we gather together to serve those who the world might have forgotten. We walk alongside those who have been left out of the glory story. We remind them that the love of God is present in warm socks, a hot meal and someone fighting for their right to be here.

Our financial offerings make our shared mission possible.

Whether you are among those who have the gift of making money or you are among those who fear you have only what you need, your participation is what makes us

a community in service to God together. Supporting the powerful word that God is for all people. That no one is excluded. And all are truly welcome.

That is what we do here at Trinity. We don't always get it right. But we try. And we learn. We listen deeply to the call of God to be kingdom bearers. Bearers of the live giving cross of Christ.

Amen.

## APPENDIX D

### FULL TEXT OF ADDITIONAL SERMON

February 12, 2017

Luke 7:18-35

By now, some of you may have heard that I am working on a Doctor of Ministry degree through Luther Seminary. The short hand term for the degree is a D. Min. Not demon. D. Min.

I know that Pastor Dan got his D. Min. so some of you are familiar with how they work. The D. Min. is considered a practical ministry degree as opposed to an academic degree. So we don't have to come up with an original question or find something to study that no one has ever studied before. Instead, we choose a topic that is pertinent to our context or congregation; even if someone else has done the same topic in another context.

My D. Min. is in Biblical Preaching. The working title of my thesis is "Preaching to Shape Witness." Exciting, I know. But if you will indulge me, I will back up a bit and get you there.

First of all, remember that I chose my topic while pastoring a 60-year-old first ring suburban congregation of just over 500 people. Like many congregations of the era, Valley of Peace can hearken back to the glory days when there were hundreds of kids in Sunday School, more than enough volunteers to do anything we dreamed of and multiple

worship services on Sunday. They can remember when church was the center of community life. Nearly everyone belonged somewhere. And schools and sports calendars kept Sundays and Wednesdays clear so families weren't forced to make tough choices between church, homework and hockey. Ah, the glory days.

Does that sound familiar to any of you?

But here's the thing: the 60s and 70s represented a kind of high point in church membership and church attendance but it doesn't appear that they were a spiritual high point for the church. Instead, the 60s and 70s were banner years for all membership-based service organizations: Lions, Eagles, Elks, Boy and Girl Scouts, Rotary, Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, Jaycees and so on. No wonder the churches did well. Everyone was doing well. Civic or spiritual, it was an era of belonging.

Today, all membership-based service organizations are on the decline and those that have survived are establishing strategies to reverse the downward trend. And we all know this is true of many congregations.

So we ask ourselves: how do we tell our story? How do we draw more people into church membership?

And many of us wonder if that is even the right question.

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What story do you tell when you talk to people about church?

A number of years ago, the church I was then serving did a Lenten series on how people do evangelism in their daily lives. A very accomplished business woman had volunteered to be one our Wednesday night speakers and talk about how she shared her faith in her work place.



A couple of weeks before she was due to speak she called and asked to meet with me. She said that she had read her prepared talk to her husband and his response was: “You sound like you are describing a social club, not a church. Better go back to the drawing board.”

What had she said in that first draft of her talk? She described the speakers, the friendships, the sense of belonging and support she and her family had found at church. Everything she described could be found in any number of places of belonging: country club, business networking group, a yoga studio, neighborhood association and so on. So she asked me: What am I supposed to say?

How do we talk about the particularity of being part of a community of faith? How do we bear witness to what we know and experience in a way that is compelling to the hearer and authentic to ourselves?

Jesus himself has the answer.

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Turning to our reading from this morning:

John the Baptist shows up for the first time since he as was imprisoned by Herod. John was put in prison before Jesus’ formal ministry even began. And it seems he is still there. But rumors of Jesus’ ministry appear to have reached John in prison. So John—the one who was sent to prepare the way—wants to know: Is Jesus the one? He asks: “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”

Is it a question asked in doubt? Is John skeptical that Jesus really is the Messiah?

Is it a question asked in frustration? Jesus came proclaiming release to the captives and yet John is still in prison. The promised kingdom of God still looks an awful lot like the kingdom of Herod, so how can Jesus be the hoped for Messiah?

Or is it a question asked in hope, seeking interpretation of all that he has heard? What wonders have reached his ears! Could it be that this is the one!

In many ways, Jesus is a rather disappointing Messiah. The hope was that the Messiah would liberate his people from Roman rule but that doesn't even seem to be a priority for Jesus. There has been no evidence of the winnowing fork or the unquenchable fire that John had proclaimed of the one who was to come after him.

So if Jesus is the one they have waited for, he is not quite what they were expecting. He isn't doing what they thought the Messiah would do.

But Jesus is doing something and that is what he draws their attention to.

John's disciples come to Jesus with John's question: "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" And Jesus tells them: "Go tell John what you have seen. Go tell John in your own words. Tell of what you have heard, what you have experienced."

Jesus doesn't send John's disciples back with explanations and a fully developed doctrine of messianic salvation. Jesus sends them back to bear witness to their own lived experience of Jesus, their own experience of God.

"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard; the blind have received their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them."

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And so we are back to our question. How do we talk about what it means to be part of a community of faith? How do we bear witness to what we know and experience in a way that is compelling to the hearer and authentic to ourselves?

We don't need to have a thoroughly developed theology of salvation. We don't need to be able to recite chapter and verse of the Bible. We don't even go to persuade people to join or sign up or enroll.

What we are called to do is bear witness to our own lived experience of God. Whatever our lived experience of God. You don't have to understand it yourselves, you don't to be able to explain it and you don't have to convince anyone of anything. Just tell what you have seen or heard or tasted or touched.

I can tell the story of my body feeling physically lifted up by the prayers of the congregation as I prepared a sermon for the funeral of a 13-year-old Harry Potter fan who died by suicide. I can tell of the community that gathered around his mother with meals, prayers and mail uncannily delivered by owl. I can tell of the deep grace exchanged when placing a small piece of bread into the hands of someone with tears running down his cheeks week after week. I can tell of the hush of holy peace while anointing the body of a saint who has just died and listening as his family prays. I can tell of the movement of the Holy Spirit when a congregation prays or sings together.

I cannot explain any of it. I cannot convince any of you that what I experienced was God. But I can tell what I know. I can tell what I feel. I can share what I see. Bearing witness to the Messiah is nothing more and nothing less than telling what you have seen and heard and tasted. Here in this place. At a bedside. In Mexico or Tanzania

or packing meals. In your confirmation small group. In bible study. In prayer. You have your own story.

You who are here have either experienced God or you have longed for God. Both stories are worth sharing. Your story, not the story of your faith, but the story of what you have experienced of God or the holy or grace. . .that the most authentic witness. It is through that witness that God will work.

Dear ones, you are God's witnesses in the world. Never doubt your worth as bearers of the greatest story. You are blessed to be light to the world, in your own bodies and in your own words! Amen.

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