

**Witness**

Psalm 126  
John 1:6-8; 19-28

The Pentagon has twice as many bathrooms as it needs. Do you know why? I'll give you a hint: it was built in the 1940s. No? The answer: in those days many states still had segregation laws that forbade African-Americans from using the same facilities as Caucasians. Hence, double bathrooms. That was not so very long ago. In high school an acquaintance of mine got arrested for taking bets on sports. In the words of author Leonard Sweet, "Today the biggest bookie you know is whatever state you inhabit." In 1970, Alvin Toffler wrote a cultural critique, Future Shock. His thesis was that not only was change **the** defining characteristic of modern life, but the **pace of that change would accelerate relentlessly**. For example, in 1967 the denominations that now comprise the PC(USA) boasted 6.5 million adherents. Today, our church has only about 2.5 million on her rolls. This represents a loss of 62%.

What changed? We commonly hear a short list of diagnoses. Many believe that our denomination's emphasis on social justice issues has alienated our former brothers and sisters. Others point to the success of the "big box" churches with their high-tech, rock concert worship experiences, claiming that younger people barely have attention points (let alone spans) and crave **Lights! Camera! Action!** Our traditional worship does not stand a chance, we hear. Still others speak of the increasing secularization of our culture in this post-modern age. With the decrease of spirituality

in the population, goes this argument, there are fewer church goers to go around. As I see it, each of these answers has a piece of the truth. But none of them gets at the real root of the problem.

I believe the Presbyterian and other “mainline” or “old-line” churches have declined primarily because we have just about given up on witnessing to the Gospel. We do not speak about Jesus. We do not speak about the redemption we have in him. We do not speak of his call to serve the poor and the broken. We do not speak of the hope we have, hope in this life and hope for the next. We see dozens of “shares” and “likes” on Facebook, for restaurants, puppy videos, gyms where friends work out, hairstylists, streamed programs on our smart TVs, some smart-aleck's insult of somebody with whom we disagree, state parks, Aunt Tillie's cornbread recipe. When was the last time you shared or liked your church?

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.'" So opens Psalm 126. Scholars cheerfully admit they have no idea who wrote this poem, nor when. Its vocabulary and Hebrew syntax contain ancient stylistic elements, but it is written in a way that makes it possible a later poet put his words into an older form as an homage to the past. It contains no details, no hints to which episode in Hebrew history it refers to with “When the Lord restored the fortunes...” This ambiguity is actually handy; it makes it easy for us to appropriate its message to our time and place.

When the Lord restores our fortunes we ought to fill our mouths with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy. We ought to bear witness to what we see God doing around us, over us, for us, through us. I had a friend, Mark, who pastored an Assemblies of God congregation. He could say the word glory in six syllables. (“GUH—LA—O—AH—OOO—RY!!!”) He thanked Jesus for everything. I swear he praised God when he found a convenient parking place. We got close enough to entrust our pulpits to each other every once in a while. Our congregations really enjoyed our different preaching styles. (At least they **said** they did.) After we had known each other for some years Mark asked me why, though he knew my faith in Jesus was real, he never heard me speak about it. I believe it was the first time in my life I became aware that I did not often speak about my faith.

As I have stated, I grew up a Presbyterian. I am as steeped in the tea of the Reformed Tradition as any man—or woman. Part of that brew is a reticence to speak about our faith. As I grew up in this church that I love, in dozens of ways I was given to understand that we simply do **not** get too enthusiastic about Jesus. My parents were not arrogant. Most of the people in the churches we attended would never want to seem snobbish. Yet somehow the style, the texture, the ethos of our corporate expression of worship and ministry came never to contain a clear witness to Jesus. I submit that holds true for us, at Central Presbyterian of Terre Haute. Please, I have made no secret of my love for this congregation and its people. I am **not** accusing us of a lack of faith. I am saying that we prefer not to speak of it too openly, too obviously. And yet a culture thirsty to hear about hope and healing surrounds us. We

have the message they long to hear. How might we witness to it?

We turn to the Gospel of John. We call the other three Gospels the synoptics because they tend to look alike (in Greek syn=similar and optic=appearance or sight). We might call John the anoptic (does not look like) or monoptic (looks unique) Gospel. John tells different parts of the Jesus story. John gives us much more of the inner monologue of Jesus, of his thoughts and prayers. John dives more deeply into the mystical parts of what Jesus said and did. This Gospel opens with poetic words of praise to the unfathomable nature of Christ. He is light and life. He has always existed. He defeats evil. But smack dab into the middle of this ode to Jesus John plants a few verses about John the Baptist. It is almost as though John saw the Baptist (a different man also named John) as so important he could not resist writing about him for even a few verses longer.

Who was John the Baptist? He was Jesus' second cousin, the son of Mary's cousin Elizabeth. The other Gospels tell us he grew up to become a charismatic figure who drew attention by dressing strangely, preaching pointed criticism of the Jewish religious authorities and baptizing people for the forgiveness of their sins. But John the Gospel writer introduces John the Baptist mostly by telling us who he said he was not. He said he was not the Messiah, not Elijah, and not "the prophet". These three denials tell us a great deal about Israel in Jesus' day.

The prophets of old had long predicted the appearance of the Messiah. Various

details in their writings led the first century Jews to expect him to arrive post haste. Many of the Old Testament prophets had given them enigmatic hints about how to predict his advent. Malachi had told them Elijah would come back to earth before the Messiah appeared. Their scholars had developed the idea of an unnamed prophet who would also presage this arrival. To the Jews of Jesus' day all the signs seemed to point to "now". Though John the Baptist denied it, the Gospel writers saw him as a God-sent messenger who bore witness to Jesus' identity as the Savior.

John the Gospel writer tells us John the Baptist, "came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him." He had as his primary purpose using his own notoriety to draw attention to Jesus, that all people might have faith in him as the Messiah. Do we have that faith? And do we have the courage and the conviction to draw people's attention to him? John came to bear witness. We are called to bear witness. How might even we Presbyterians do that?

We need not pronounce glory in six syllables. We need not worship as though Bono of U2 suddenly stopped a song to share five ways to witness about Jesus to our neighbors. In fact, Bono himself might give us clues to how we can witness to Jesus with integrity and effectiveness. From I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For to The First Time to 40, Bono has written and performed songs with Christian themes. To his credit, he has never claimed to be an exemplary Jesus follower. No, he has been too busy doing genuine work to bring reliable water sources to Third World villages and advocating with politicians for just policies. In fact, because of this last effort,

which he has tried to do privately, Bono has developed a real friendship with George W. Bush. Two Jesus followers the world might think had nothing in common. Except for their witness to the Messiah, that is.

If we Presbyterians cannot quite follow John the Baptist's example of showy, confrontive advocacy for Jesus as the Christ, perhaps we can do real witnessing in quieter yet equally potent ways. First, we can strive always to do our best to live as Jesus taught we must live. From that solid platform we can venture out into mission, into works of service to the last and the least. In a noisy world, nothing speaks louder than action. And with those who know us best we can find those moments to speak. We can witness to Jesus as the Messiah. We can say something like, "I believe in Jesus. I did nothing to make it happen. It's a gift and I'm grateful I've received it. My faith helps me make sense of even the most terrible things. Things like the deaths of people we love in the Time of COVID. It really does work for me. If you don't understand what I'm talking about, or if you wonder whether I mean it, maybe you could join me the next time we build a ramp for a disabled person, or when we pin mittens and socks on our Giving Tree for street people. I believe this would help you just as it would the people we help."

Witness to Jesus. Speak of his love and his calls to justice and compassion in word and deed. Someday, God willing soon, we will reopen our church. When that blessed time arrives, invite somebody you know to join in a mission, or even (Gasp!) to worship with us. Witness to Jesus.