

Witnesses, Not Spectators
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Luke 24:44-53
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Anybody can choose to be a spectator. Anybody!

But not everybody can choose to be a witness.

Let me explain.

A spectator is someone who sees or observes an event: a play, a ballgame, a concert, or some other form of entertainment. That's it. A spectator is simply present for an activity.

Being a spectator is easy. Well let me rephrase that. Once you've become a spectator, it's easy to be a spectator. It's no easy task to procure a ticket for *Hamilton* on Broadway or courtside seats for a Lakers game, or even an extra ticket for Aunt Margaret to your daughter's high school graduation. And to be fair, the getting to and from an event is no easy task either: there's traffic and parking and navigating to your seat and the second mortgage you've got to negotiate in order to purchase a tub of popcorn and a drink.

But we're not talking about the act of becoming a spectator, we're talking about the act of being a spectator. And it's simple. It's a transaction. You pay a fee. In return, you get a ticket that entitles you to observe an event. There is no obligation to do anything other than sit in your seat and wait for the final curtain or the final buzzer. And most spectators these days aren't even interested in the spectacle they've paid to see. They're more interested in another spectacle: the mobile device in their hand.

It's easy to be a spectator.

But a witness, well that's a different story. A witness doesn't just observe an event, a witness experiences an event. Spectators watch a play. Witnesses allow themselves to be swept into the drama. They let their minds enter the story; they let their emotions and expectations follow the players on stage; they let the music of the orchestra flow through them; they offer their applause; they allow the play to become part of their lived experience. Witnesses invest themselves into the drama that unfolds before and around them. The act of being a witness is not a transaction. It's a transformation. It means we hurt and laugh and love, and at the end of it all, our lives are given some new form of meaning. To witness is to lay eyes on the authenticity of *Les Mis* or to feel the ecstasy (or pain!) of a game-winning shot, or to hear a musical instrument produce rhythms and patterns you could never imagine – to witness is to let yourself be carried away by the power of a single moment, and to know that from then on, your life will never be the same.

Some years ago, the author of Luke sat down to pen an orderly account of the good news. And from the outset, the author makes it clear that this good news will be shared by witnesses: women and men whose lives have been transformed by the ministry of Jesus; women and men who allow themselves to be swept into the significance of a single moment: Emanuel – God with us!

Here's how it starts.

Luke tells us that a Galilean peasant strolled into his hometown temple. And when the time came, he flipped open the sacred scroll of Isaiah and read these famous words:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And then he rolled up the scroll and said, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

For the author of Luke, Jesus is filled with God's spirit, filled from beginning to end, and because he's filled with this spirit, he is empowered to be a witness to all of God's possibilities.

God's spirit allows Jesus to heal the afflicted, to reshape the social order, to feed the hungry, to bring hope to the hopeless, to offer grace in places it never seemed possible.

Throughout Luke's gospel, Jesus is a witness to God's investment in the present. And those who embrace that witness, they too become evidence of God's presence: The shepherd rejoices upon finding the lost sheep, the woman upon finding her lost coin, the father upon finding his lost son. God is revealed. Here. Now. And that's cause for celebration. And witness!

Jesus, filled by God's spirit, dares to enter to God's unfolding drama. And what a witness he becomes!

But the disciples of Luke's gospel are not quite ready to be witnesses. For the entirety of the story, the disciples are content to be spectators.

As the drama of Jesus' ministry unfolds, all too often, the disciples sit back and watch. Theirs is a transactional ministry.

Some days, the disciples are like census agents: as they count the number of the people in the crowd, and the number of miracles performed, and the number of meals served, they never once stop to notice the expressions on the faces that Jesus encounters, or to inquire from these strangers what it feels like to experience Christ's healing hands, or even to ask the names of the newly-transformed. Healing and feeding and teaching are reduced to ledger items.

Some days, the disciples are like scorekeepers: they want leadership to be determined by hours worked or dollars spent and forgiveness to be doled out as if it were a commodity; and they judge the meanings of parables as if they were linesmen: fair or foul, in or out. God's community is reduced to a customer-loyalty program, compete with a keychain card you can swipe for bonus points.

And all too often the disciples act as if they're sitting in the club level: they've been given VIP access to Jesus' inner-circle. That means it's only them who can really experience Jesus; it's only them who can really hear truth; it's only them who deserve the full rewards of God's kingdom.

The disciples have their golden ticket. The rights and inclusions are printed on the back. All that's left to do is to wait for God's kingdom to come near.

Lucky for the disciples (and for us!), Luke's gospel doesn't end at verse 24:43. In today's lection, we read about the ascension of Jesus – the moment when Jesus ascends into heaven.

Jesus gathers the disciples, and he reminds them of all that's happened in their time together; all the things that were done to fulfill what the scriptures said would take place.

And there's one verse I want to focus on: Jesus says, "You are witnesses to all these things!"

In other words, "Stop being spectators!"

Jesus knows this isn't an easy thing to be. Witnesses have to allow themselves to be vulnerable. And they have to be courageous and consistent and honest. And it's hard! Because being a spectator seems so much easier!

But Jesus will not leave the disciples empty-handed. Jesus tells them that the same gift God had given him – the gift that allowed him to experience and participate in God's unfolding drama – they too, will soon receive that gift.

Spoiler alert: That gift is the Holy Spirit. And the disciples will receive that gift 40 days later at Pentecost. And Jonathan's gonna tell you all about it next week.

But for now, Jesus just tells the disciples that something big is coming. Just wait and be patient. And when the time comes, you'll be empowered to be my witnesses to all the world.

And here's one of the most amazing things. The disciples listen. They follow Jesus out of the city to Bethany. Jesus blesses their new work, and there on a mountain peak, Jesus ascends to heaven.

And what do the disciples do? They allow themselves to be swept into God's unfolding drama. There, in that place, they worship God. And even better, they leave Bethany filled with great joy, a joy that sends them forth into the expectant and sweeping winds of Pentecost. And in the very near future, these recently-transformed-spectators will be the next extension of Christ's ministry. They will be witnesses to all of God's possibilities.

Friends, the challenge of Ascension Sunday is not to prove the mechanics of a human body transforming into a heavenly one. Though if you ever find yourself in Bethany, there is a chapel with a footprint in stone claiming to be Christ's last earthly footprint. And if I recall, there's no charge for admission.

No, the challenge is this: to stop living transactional lives of faith and start living transformational ones.

Our prayers, our anthems, our acts of worship, our acts of service, our very lives – we cannot view these things as tickets punched to receive atonement or fulfillment, or as a checklist for righteousness. God does not call us to be passive spectators.

God's kingdom is not something to be procured. God's kingdom is something to be experienced. Here. Now.

God calls us to open our hearts and minds to God's possibilities. And if we allow ourselves to be witnesses, we may find that the Holy Spirit will enable us to find God's goodness in a simple moment: in a prayer, in a song, in an act of kindness, or even in relationship with one another.

Like the disciples, we wait to receive God's spirit. And like the disciples, we are confident it will come. And like the disciples, we too are called to be witnesses.

The spirit of the Lord is upon us! Let's not be afraid to pay attention. And when that spirit falls upon us, let's not be afraid to be witnesses! Amen.