



Bishop's Sermon, the 118th Annual Council

The theme for this year's Annual Council is taken from five simple words from the first chapter of the book of Acts. **"...you will be my witnesses."**

If we zoom out from those words, we see that Jesus has finished his earthly ministry and is ascending toward heaven. But before he departs, the disciples have one last question for him, **"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?"**

And here's how Jesus answered the question, **"...it's not for you to know the times and periods that the Father has set by his authority. *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*"**

Did you notice that the disciples' question was a political question? It's a "when" question about the restoration of a nation-state. But notice that Jesus responds to this political "when" question with a "how" answer. And he makes clear what the perennial purpose of the church is. In one of Jesus' most dramatic vertical moments, he makes a definitive horizontal decree: **"You will receive power to be my witnesses."** That's Jesus' answer and approach to the restoration of the nation state then and for us now, **"...to be his witnesses."** The promise and reception of power precedes its application. In just a few days, Jesus' promise would become a reality.

The church calls this promise-keeping. Pentecost and this power has been ours ever since. It's power for the church to be a world house - a transnational, trans-political, fellowship of love in scope and impact. And, it's power for the church to be a freedom house, like one of those stops on Harriet Tubman's underground railroad. A brave place, where we believe, belong and become more like Christ. A place where lies fall away and fears about things temporal fade - where we remember that we are more than our wounds and chains. To be a witness is preceded by the gift of power, because Jesus knew just how hard it was to live for God in the real world. He knew that if we would be faithful to our founding purpose, things wouldn't be easy. Jesus knew that to live for God means that you will regularly be outnumbered, so you shouldn't be out-powered. If indeed love is the most durable element in the universe, you will not be out-powered.

You are not alone. And faith in Jesus is not a fool's errand. That's the good news! That is our witness. That is what we affirm whenever we gather, that we are the beneficiaries of a vertical assurance for horizontal endurance! The witnessing power that Jesus promised to those, then, is our sending and sustaining power now in Middle and North Georgia.

“...Renew in these your servants the covenant you made with them at their Baptism,” the Prayer Book prays,

and **“send them forth in the power of that spirit to perform the service you set before them....”**

The elegant genius of this gift of power to witness, is that Jesus gives it to those who, just days ago, got it all so terribly wrong. These are the same ones who fled the scene of his arrest and the same ones Jesus had to fight through locked doors to forgive.

To claim inheritance with the disciples of Jesus and to be a witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is to understand this, you are a member of the global second chance club. That is our founding DNA. That is our witness. That is our offer to the world. Like the woman at the well in John’s gospel, Jesus sees past our faults and sees our needs and sees the needs of the world. Maybe Jesus entrusted his disciples with this power, because he hoped we would administrate it through the new thick humility that comes with being recipients of grace.

The power to bear witness to Jesus in a sin-sick world is our privilege and our purpose. And the beauty of this calling is that as we are learning **“...to love like Jesus,”** as we are commending this beautiful struggle to others. To be a witness is the power to increase the celebrity of Jesus by doing what Jesus did wherever you are. But not only that, it’s power to trust God. It’s power to share your story as a medicine for someone else’s malady. It’s power to listen and understand. It’s power to be selfless. Power to be steadfast. Power to grow, stretch, and include. Power to face loss. Power to tell the truth in love. Power to imagine. Power to be honest with ourselves. Power to overcome fear. Power to choose strength over aggression. Power to be bold and gentle. Power to fend off despair. Power to endure suffering. Power to forgive. Power to accept forgiveness. Power to hope. Power to hold steady. Power to innovate. Power to live a good life. Power to die a good death. Power to apologize. Power to reconcile. Power to love. Power to accept the fact that every human being is a sibling with dignity.

To wield God power in these ways and give God’s strengthening touch the credit is witness, and witness is the climax of worship. To wield God power in these ways mobilizes compassion. To wield God power in these ways is to be an echo of the truth of Jesus. We as his followers bear witness and attest that **life** is trusting God especially when it seems foolish. And we hereby attest and affirm that life is most abundant when we center Jesus, decenter ourselves and seek the flourishing of others. And it is our testimony that community is best and most resiliently built when power is expressed as mercy. That is our witness.

Now, if I have thus far failed to make my point this morning about being a witness, give me one more try. There was an old rock-and-roll group wonderfully named, Blood Sweat and Tears. And in the late 60’s, they recorded two important songs. The first song, -let’s see if you know it, **“What goes up, must come down, spinning wheel got to go**

round.” Now if the song lyrics are true, if what goes up must come down, then the best evidence of God being high and lifted up in our lives is the personal and public lengths and depths we are willing to go for God.

Every time Jesus was high and lifted up, at his Transfiguration, on the Cross and here at his Ascension, he made sure that what goes up comes down as witness. At his Transfiguration, he made sure his disciples understood that mountaintop moments were to fuel valley low work. At his Crucifixion, he paused his pain to include a thief in paradise and knit a grieving family together. And here, as Jesus goes up, power comes down to continue Jesus’ unfolding friend making campaign. What goes up must come down.

But the second song helps us to understand that to be witness isn’t just our work, it’s our joy. The second song by Blood Sweat and Tears is, let’s see if you know it,

**“I’ve lost at love before.
Got mad and closed the door.
But you said child just once more.**

**I chose you for the one, Now we’re having so much fun,
You treated me so kind, I’m about to lose my mind,**

“You’ve made me so very happy, I’m so glad you came into my life.”

That is our witness. Jesus, we’re so glad you came into our lives. So glad you’re working through our closed doors. So glad we’re losing our earthly mind and taking on your mind and going where you would have us to go. To know Jesus is to have a personal joy that overflows into your public life. A joy that the world can’t give and that the world can’t take away. A joy that moves us beyond our comfort and convenience. A joy that captures us and sets us free. That gathers us and dispatches us. The joy of being located by God and loved by God until the surplus of it all washes over the lines the world imposes. We are the stewards of this wonder, with our lips and our lives, we are His witnesses. AMEN.

Bishop Rob Wright

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Rob Wright", with a small cross symbol to the left.