



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

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The Lord's Day
January 18, 2009

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The Power of Witness
John 1:29-51

Of all the memorials and museums in Washington, D.C., perhaps the most moving and disturbing is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. If you've ever visited it, you know what I mean. It stands as a memorial to the six million Jews who died in Hitler's Holocaust, and it tells the story in some very graphic ways.

I remember watching the dedication service for this memorial on television back in the spring of 1993. One of the key speakers was Elie Wiesel, a noted author and scholar and speaker who is himself Jewish and a survivor of the Holocaust. As he spoke, he talked about the power of *testimony*, the power of those who had seen and experienced these horrors at the hands of the Nazis *bearing witness* to what they had seen and experienced. And as he spoke, I saw engraved on the wall behind him these words: "We must bear witness . . ."

As I saw those words emblazoned on that wall and listened to Wiesel, I was deeply moved. Holocaust survivors have committed to telling their story, to bearing witness to the horror of what happened, in hopes that it will never happen again. So often, people refuse to talk about such experiences because they're so painful. But these survivors are willing to endure that pain so that the world will remember. Because if we ever forget, it may very well happen all over again!

So Holocaust survivors talk about the power of bearing witness. Indeed, there is tremendous power in a person's simply telling what he or she has seen and experienced! It grabs people's attention and shows them the impact of what the witness has experienced firsthand.

So they bear witness to their horror and pain.

But witness doesn't just have to be about the bad things and horrible acts we experience. We as Christians have something wonderful, something that has eternal significance that we have the responsibility to bear witness about—the good news that God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us, and raised him from the dead that we might have eternal life in him as we live under his rule now and for eternity!

And when we as believers in Jesus Christ bear witness of him, that powerful act is accompanied by the power of the gospel message itself, and the power of the Holy Spirit as he works in the hearts of our hearers.

Let's think together for a while about *the power of witness*. That's what this text we've read this morning is about.

Bearing witness to the Christ

The Jewish leaders had sent a delegation to question John the Baptist about who he was and why he was preaching and baptizing. He had denied being the Messiah (the Christ), and had told them that the Messiah was already among them.

The next day as John was preaching and baptizing, he saw Jesus coming toward him. When he did, he told those who were with him, “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29).¹ He went on to point out that Jesus was the one he had been talking about, and that even though he had not realized before that Jesus was the one, he had come baptizing so “that he might be revealed to Israel” (1:31).

Then John bore witness that he had seen “the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him (Jesus)” (1:32). That was how God had told John that he would recognize the Messiah, so John said, “I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God” (1:33-34).

The next day, two of John’s disciples were standing there with him. Jesus was passing by, and again John cried out and said, “Look, the Lamb of God!” (1:35-36).

And then something amazing happened—when John’s disciples heard him, *they followed Jesus* (1:37). Someone, I can’t remember who it was, has said that this was the crowning glory of John’s ministry: they heard John and followed Jesus.

And as they followed Jesus, he turned and asked them, “What do you want?” They asked him, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” He simply replied, “Come and you will see” (1:38-39).

It was now about 4:00 in the afternoon, so these two disciples stayed with Jesus. One of these two was Andrew, the brother of Simon. As he and the other disciple stayed with Jesus that evening, they no doubt listened to him and learned from him and about him. They experienced his presence and his person. And it no doubt changed them.

In fact, the first thing Andrew did after he left Jesus was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah.” He not only told him; Andrew brought Simon to Jesus, and Jesus gave Simon the name we know him by—*Peter* (1:40-42).

But it didn’t stop with Andrew and Simon Peter. The next day, when Jesus was getting ready to go back to Galilee, he found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Philip was from Bethsaida, the same hometown as Andrew and Simon. He wanted to share the news with his friend Nathanael, so he found him and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (1:43-45).

Nathanael’s response was a bit condescending: “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (1:46).

Philip didn’t argue the point. With confidence in what he was bearing witness about, he simply said, “Come and see” (1:46).

Jesus saw them coming, and said about Nathanael, “Behold a true Israelite, in who there is no deceit!” (1:47).² Nathanael was amazed at Jesus’ comment, and asked him, “How do you know me?” When Jesus told him he saw him under the fig tree before Philip called him, Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel” (1:48-50). At this Jesus promised that he would witness greater things than his seeing him under a fig tree—that he would “see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (1:50-51).

At least one scholar has seen a connection with Jacob here. Donald G. Miller points out that Nathanael’s not having any deceit in him meant that he had none of the “qualities of Jacob

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

² My translation.

before he became Israel,” and that “what Jacob saw in vision (the ladder to heaven) is now a reality in Jesus.”³ Nathanael was experiencing Jesus as the Messiah he was hoping for!

Bearing witness about Jesus

Do you see what happened here? And do you see how it happened? *John’s disciples, Peter, and Nathanael followed Jesus through the witness of John, Andrew, and Philip.* That’s pretty straightforward.

But what happened in this text reminds us of a vitally important truth: *People come to Jesus Christ when we who have met him bear witness about him.* There is incredible power in bearing witness about Jesus Christ!

When we tell others who Jesus is and what he’s done and does for us, it’s a powerful act. We tell them about him out of the Scriptures, and out of our own experience and relationship with him. When we do, and we depend on the Holy Spirit’s power and working, God uses our witness to bring others to faith in Christ.

Now there are some important things we need to understand about this kind of witnessing.

First, *we have to remember that we’re bearing witness about a person, Jesus.* While we might talk about Christian teaching and truth, or about the church and our life together in Christ, our witness must be about *Jesus himself*, the one who is the way, the truth, and the life!

Others persuade with reason and doctrine, and these are good and important things when they’re true.

But we must persuade by bearing witness to a person with whom we have a living, dynamic relationship! As we do, we can talk about the aspect of who he is and what he has done and our relationship with him that speaks most directly to our hearer’s need.

That’s how it worked here in our text.

- John described him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world . . .
- Andrew called him the Messiah, the Lord’s Anointed who would deliver his people from bondage . . .
- Philip called him the one of whom Moses and the prophets wrote, stressing his role as the long awaited righteous ruler and Savior . . .

You see, Jesus’ person and work are like a symphony orchestra—the strings appeal to some, the brass or woodwinds to others. All the instruments are vital parts of the orchestra, but the various elements attract different people.

And that’s exactly how our witness works. Jesus is our model for it! In John 3 and 4, he dealt very differently with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the official whose son was ill.

Through our experience with Jesus through studying his Word, through prayer, and through walking with him, we come to understand more and more the richness and depth of his person and work. As we do, we can share as we witness that aspect of who he is and what he has done and does that speaks most directly to each person’s needs.

Now from this text *we also see those to whom we can and must bear witness . . .*

Just as John did, we should bear witness to *those we have influence over.* We all have influence over someone, for good or bad. And we should use that influence to tell them in winsome ways about Jesus.

³ Comments on John 1:47-51, *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 1288.

Andrew witnessed about Jesus to his brother Simon. Shouldn't we also be willing to bear witness to *our family*? Is there someone in your family who has never really met Jesus?

Admittedly, that can be one of the hardest situations to bear witness in, especially if there are strained relationships or things from the past hanging in the air. Sometimes situations hinder or maybe even prevent witnessing to our families. Sometimes the doors just don't open and the fences or walls have been put up too high. But shouldn't our family be some of the first we want to tell about Jesus?

And then what about our *friends*? Philip found Nathanael to tell him about Jesus! Surely you have friends or acquaintances who don't know the Lord! Wouldn't it be the greatest act of friendship you could ever do to tell them about the Savior?

There's one other thing that I have to mention. And that's this: *we can bear a genuine witness only to what we have seen or experienced*. In other words, you or I can only bear witness of Jesus to others if we've had a personal encounter with him through faith *ourselves*.

John the Baptist, Andrew, and Philip all had an encounter with Jesus, and so must we.

A witness is allowed in court only if his or her testimony is relevant. The witness must know something about the person or the event involved. We can't tell others what Jesus has done for us if we haven't experienced his grace and forgiveness ourselves! We must, after all, have something to witness about!

People come to Jesus Christ when we who have met him bear witness about him. That's how it was with John's disciples and Peter and Nathanael—they followed Jesus through the witness of John, Andrew, and Philip.

Maybe you're saying, "How do I tell them?"

It's simple; just tell them who Jesus is, what he's done for you, and what he means to you in your life. Tell them how he died and rose from the dead so they can be right with God as well, and how they can put their faith in him and know him too.

Think about this for a minute: Who led you to Christ? I don't mean who baptized you, or who was preaching when you made your public profession of faith. What I do mean is this: whose witness played the major role in your committing yourself to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?

Now think about this: What if that person or those people had never bothered to bear witness to you about Jesus? Where would you be left? How would you have heard of him and how you could be right with God through him?

Now think about one more thing. There are people all around us—people over whom we have influence, family, friends and acquaintances—people who don't know Jesus. They may never have had anyone who knew him to sit down with them and tell them what he's done for them and what he means to them.

Could it be that the Lord has brought those people into your life so that *you* can bear witness to them about Jesus Christ?

The challenge of this sermon is simple—*the Lord wants us to tell others about Jesus Christ*, whom we personally know, so they might put their faith in him.

The question is, Will we do it?

Will you?

We must bear witness . . .

†MEG