

“Bear Witness”
 Acts 2:1-21
 John 15:26-27
 May 23, 2021
 Rev. David Hutchinson

There is a difference between witnessing an event, on the one hand...

...and bearing witness - - to the truth of that event, on the other hand.

A difference between witnessing - - and bearing witness.

To witness something is to observe it - - to see - - or to hear - - or to touch.

The bear witness to something is to - - show that it is true - - or that it happened.

You can witness something - - and then never speak of it again.

Or you can bear witness - - to what you have seen and heard.

There is a kind of poetry that incorporates BOTH of these aspects of witnessing.

Poetry of Witness is a long tradition in English language poetry.

In her book, “Poetry of Witness”, and before that “Against Forgetting”

Carolyn Forché traces this tradition from 1500 to 2001.

The book “Poetry of Witness” is a collection of 300 poems composed by people facing extreme conditions. / These poets were witnesses to the horrors of war. / They were abducted by slave traders - - or survived war - - or were persecuted and tortured for their beliefs.

Carolyn Forché describes the poems as two things: She writes that they are both the record or trace of an event - - and also a new event in themselves. / Writing the poem accomplishes two things, she says, “It acknowledges the event instead of denying it - - AND it initiates a new event that exerts some control over the original event and its long term effects.”

So these poets have faced or witnessed the duress of war and exile - -

AND then - - they give VOICE to their experiences.

They have witnessed - - and then they bear witness.

These poems give us a way to think about the Pentecost event in the Bible.

In Acts chapter 2 we read about the beginning of the church in ancient times.

Early followers of Jesus were scared and persecuted.

And when they gather in Acts 2 what takes place is very much an auditory event.

That is - - the events are a lot about hearing and speaking.

There are visual elements like the fire.

But even the fire is described as “tongues”

Those gathered there - - HEAR a rush of a wind.

They speak in many languages.

And Peter stands up to speak.

This Pentecost event is the beginning of bearing witness.

The early followers had witnessed - - Jesus death.

They had witnessed persecution.

They had witnessed injustice.

Now - - they begin to bear witness.

They begin to speak.

They begin to show - - the TRUTH - - of what they have witnessed.

When they leave this gathering - - these new followers - - will bear witness.

And part of HOW they will do that is to SPEAK - - about what they HEARD.

They HEARD the WIND of the SPIRIT.

They heard - - Peter’s message.

And now - - they will bear witness to its TRUTH.

These early followers will essentially be - - “EAR-WITNESSES”.

In law dictionaries - - dating back as far as 1856 - - there is a term called an “ear-witness”. / According to a law dictionary by John Bouvier - - an ear-witness - - is someone who “attests to things he has heard himself”.

If you hear something and then give a report in court - - you are an ear-witness.

But being an ear-witness - - is only HALF of BEARING witness.

To BEAR witness - - you would not just report an event - - but attest to it.

You would RESPOND somehow.

You would testify that there is a TRUTH in what you heard.

The Gospel according to John is the companion reading this morning for the Acts story.

John uses both the word witness and the term “bear witness”.

John says that the Holy Spirit will BEAR witness to God.

The Holy Spirit - - who is described here as the “counselor” - - bears witness to God as “the TRUTH”. / John even describes this witness-bearing Spirit as - - the “spirit of truth”.

Then he says, “You ALSO are witnesses”.

In the gospel of John it says that these followers are witnesses - - because they have been WITH Jesus since the beginning. / Presumably LISTENING to Jesus - - as they are when Jesus says this to them.

It seems to me that a lot of what I hear about - - when it comes to witnesses - - in our culture today - - is an attempt to DIS-credit witnesses. / Lawyers - - want to show that witnesses - - do NOT accurately BEAR witness. / Some lawyers - - want to show that - - there is no TRUTH in what so called witnesses say.

Why?

People try to discredit witnesses - - when they don't want to believe what they are saying
 - - or when they want to lie about it - - or get away with something.

That's why there are witness protection programs.

The question for us is - - is there anything to which WE are called to bear witness?

HOW does one bear witness to faith today?

How does one SHOW - -

that what we say about God's grace, and justice and mercy are - - true?

As we think about the challenge of bearing witness I want to return to the original act.

Before we bear witness - - we witness.

The original act is to witness.

And even THAT - - is something to tend to.

Sometimes we just want to close our ears - - and pull the blinds - - and throw away our
 cell-phones and turn off the TV. / But these texts today would challenge us to keep our ears
 OPEN - - in order to witness - - so we CAN bear witness.

We can't bear witness - - if we don't first witness.

We can't tell the truth of Jesus - - if we don't first listen and encounter Jesus.

To return to the book of poetry - - with this point in mind - - let's consider a poem of
 witness by the author, Carolyn Forché. / Her poem "The Colonel" was written in 1978 about
 her experience in El Salvador. / She describes a military officer, the colonel, confronting
 herself and a few other witnesses.

The poem begins with the line:

"What you have heard is true".

She describes the colonel spilling human ears from a bag.

She says that “he swept the ears to the floor”

And then - - she writes:

“Some of the ears on the floor caught the scrap of his voice.

Some of the ears on the floor - - were pressed to the ground.”

This is her poem of witness.

And in writing it - - she bears witness - - to the atrocities of war.

To have your “ear to the ground” is an expression that means - - to listen.

And even these severed ears in the poem - - are still listening.

That is part of the challenge of the poem:

Listen - - for what is true.

Keep listening.

And then bear witness - - to what is true.

So - - is there anything to which WE are called to bear witness?

HOW does one bear witness to faith today?

What does that mean for us - - in the world we live in?

How does one SHOW - -

that what we say about God’s grace, and justice and mercy are - - true?

We can begin where the early followers began:

With the Holy Spirit.

With the sound of the wind.

That Spirit - - is a counselor.

Listen for the counselor.

I believe that this is how the gospel reading from John helps us interpret this Acts passage
- - this Pentecost event. / We are reminded to listen - - for the voice of truth.

And then - - when you have listened long enough - - and you hear and understand...

Then speak.

Witness - - and then bear witness.

Show that there is still truth in what we say.

Amen.