

Power to Become Witnesses

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Acts 1:1-8

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

If a 10-year-old can understand God's Big Story, you can too!

We're preaching God's Big Story of creation, fall and redemption this year in worship. This sermon series is intended for those of you who have never read the Bible and don't know where to start. It's also designed for any who have read the Bible but don't understand how the whole thing fits together.

I wonder sometimes, as a preacher, whether my sermons connect with people. A father shared with me recently his son's notes from Easter Sunday. With Robert's permission, we have reprinted his sermon notes on page 7 of today's bulletin. Across the top of the page, Robert wrote the words, "Creation, Fall and Redemption." Under the heading "Creation," he wrote "God makes man." Underneath "Fall," he scrawled "We fall out of relationship with God." Under "Redemption," he inscribed the words "God forgives us." Sweet! If a 10-year-old can understand God's Big Story, you can, too!

By reducing God's Big Story to three words, we're not suggesting the Bible is simplistic. Beware of "how-to" sermons which reduce the Christian life to three easy lessons or five simple steps. This is called tidy preaching, which offers tidy, pat answers to complex problems. Our aim is to simplify the Bible, not make it simplistic.

Learning God's Big Story isn't merely an academic exercise. It involves your whole life. How can your story become part of God's Big Story?

God made you for relationship. That's why you are made. You are created to live in relationship with God and each other.

Sin thwarts this relationship with God. Sin is an archery term meaning to miss the target. Sin causes us to miss the mark and fall out of relationship with God. We have fallen and can't get up. We need rescue!

Our preaching over the last five months has focused on Jesus' rescue. Redemption is what the gospels call it. There you have it—God's Big Story. God creates. Sin destroys. God redeems.

Acts is the book that follows the four gospels. If you're unfamiliar with this book, be not dismayed. We'll be preaching on Acts from now until Thanksgiving—28 chapters spread over 28 Sundays.

Why Acts? I'm so glad you asked. God's Big Story doesn't end with Jesus. God's Big Story continues in the lives of his disciples.

Acts begins with the words, "In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up into heaven" (1:1). For the identity of this first book, turn back to the introductory words of Luke's

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gospel, “It seemed good to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus” (1:4). Luke and Acts were originally a two-volume edition. We call them books; actually they’re papyrus scrolls on which God’s Big Story was copied by hand. These scrolls were written by a physician named Luke to an obscure ruler, Theophilus. The first scroll that bears Luke’s name recounts Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection. The second scroll picks up with Jesus’ resurrection and moves the story forward 30 years.

The first century mirrors our day. We live in troubled times. These are days of economic uncertainty. Now there is a looming threat of a pandemic. Militant atheism is on the rise. Right and wrong are becoming categories with no universal meaning. Secularism threatens to undermine society and the church.

Everyone take a deep breath. God is still on his throne. Take a page from the early church. Our Christian forebears lived in perilous times. It was a world in which Caesar ruled. Bitter Jewish-Gentile relations threatened to implode the early church. We must take our lead as a church from first century Christians, not our 21st century secular world.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus instructs his followers, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” Power in the Greek, *dunamis*, is where we derive our English word

dynamite. God provides Holy Spirit dynamism to fulfill his mission.

“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be my witnesses.” This little conjunction “and” connects the power of the Holy Spirit with Jesus’ commission to be his witnesses. Witness means to testify. In a court of law, people are summoned to the witness stand to testify to what they have seen and heard. Christians are summoned to bear witness by what we say and do to everything we have heard and seen in Jesus.

The Greek word for witness, *martyria*, is the source of our English word martyr. A martyr witnesses to the point of death. Martyrdom, you might say, is the ultimate witness.

The last words out of Jesus’ mouth in Luke’s gospel, “You are witnesses of these things” (24:48), are virtually identical to the first words Jesus utters in Acts, “You shall be my witnesses” (1:8). If witnessing is the last thing Jesus says in Luke and the first thing Jesus says in Acts, witnessing must be rather important to Jesus.

“You shall be my witnesses” is a major theme in Acts (2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 31:31; 22:15). The purpose of the church, pure and simple, is to bear witness to Jesus.

“Witness Boldly” is one of our church’s seven covenants. The adverb *boldly* counteracts the timidity of our age. An increasingly secular culture asks Christians to keep our faith out of the public arena. Since when is anything of value merely private and personal?

***Speak to God
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Everybody witnesses to things they value! People talk about home remodeling because they value their homes. People talk about their favorite restaurants because they value dining. People talk about their favorite musicians because they value good music. Everyone witnesses to things of value. Why would anyone think it strange Christians would want to talk about Jesus Christ?

Verse 8 serves as a one sentence summary of Acts. Chapters 1-7 depict Jesus' summons to be witnesses in Jerusalem. Chapters 8-12 describe the gospel's advance to the outlying regions of Judea and Samaria. The mention of Samaria is significant since Jesus' salvation now extends to non-Jews. Chapters 13-28 describe the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth—to Rome itself.

What is your Jerusalem? It's precisely the places where we live and work. We have the greatest influence over the people with whom we live and work. You will be my witnesses in Vienna, Great Falls, McLean, Falls Church, Fairfax, Annandale, Oakton, Chantilly, Reston and Herndon.

What is your Judea and Samaria? It extends into neighboring DC. Jesus calls us to expand his witness beyond the comfortable borders of our friends and family to Anacostia, Foggy Bottom, Adams Morgan and Capital Hill.

What does it mean to witness to Christ to the ends of the earth? Most of us realistically can't go this far; that's why we send Christian missionaries to go on our

behalf. Let me tell you about five people raised in this church who have been called, equipped and sent to the ends of the earth. (Incidentally, the oldest among the five is 42, so these are people investing the prime of their lives in witness to the ends of the earth!) Keith and his wife, Marti, run a health clinic serving Bedouins living in the Middle East. David and his wife, Angie, direct a children's therapy center in the Muslim country of Morocco. Ron and his wife, Edita, are leaving the creature comforts of the states to relocate to India, where he will teach computer skills to the urban poor, especially among those of the lowest caste system called untouchables or Dalits. Val ministers to children and adults with AIDS in South Africa. Another VPC family served our denomination in Tajikistan and are now working with Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship to take the good news to people in the Persian world.

After Jesus commissions his disciples to be witnesses, notice what happens next. They don't call a meeting to launch a new missionary strategy. They don't send out mission teams to do their witnessing for them. We are told they devote themselves to prayer (1:14). They pray about their witnessing.

Pray about the people God places in your life. Speak to God about your friend before you speak to your friend about God.

Ask God to give you a heart for people who need to know God's Big Story. Stan calls it "people eyes," to see the enormity of human need all around us.

***Witness as you
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can't.***

Be a good listener. Ask people questions, not the kind of questions that put people on the defensive. Ask the type of questions that will let you know what people care about and value.

Look for teachable moments with people. Don't force the issue. Peter offers us wise counsel, "Always be ready to give a reason for the hope that lies within us" (1 Peter 3:15).

Don't argue with people. I've never met a single person yet who has been won to faith through arguing.

You may be saying to yourself, I don't know enough to witness. Since when do you need to know all the answers? If we knew all the answers, we would be a know-it-all, and no one likes a know-it-all.

Be willing to admit your struggle and doubt. Otherwise, faith will seem hopelessly out of reach for people.

We witness by what we say and do. Do our actions substantiate or undermine our witness? St. Francis of Assisi said it well: "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

Don't obsess about your witness—relax and be yourself. God calls us to witness in a manner consistent with our personalities and temperaments. Witness as you can, not as you can't.

