

“Learning to Witness”
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What does it mean to witness? It’s kind of interesting that the Apostles didn’t really understand what that meant, even when they had Jesus with them all of their lives; even when Jesus died on that cross; even after they recognized that Jesus had left the tomb. Now, even when they see him in his resurrected form and are allowed to touch his hands and his feet - he eats in front of them, so that they understand, yet again, that he is not a ghost - still they don’t understand. We really don’t have an idea that they understood a thing until Pentecost. It wasn’t until the Holy Spirit filled them that they had understanding.

So, when you witness to people and they say, “Well, I don’t believe, because I can’t see it with my hands, can’t touch it with my fingers. If I could just have God prove [it] to me, then I would believe.” Well, we know that isn’t true either, because the Apostle’s even saw Jesus. They heard Jesus. They witnessed Jesus - and still they couldn’t believe - and they touched his hands, his feet. They watched him eat. They knew he wasn’t a ghost, and still they didn’t know what to witness to.

So, the idea that if I was just able to touch and see God, I would know that God exists, doesn’t hold weight. But I like the way Philip Yancey talks about this passage. Philip Yancey is this pop theologian, but he does some pretty good things. And, he sums up the whole of religion and history as a cycle of goodness, fallenness and redemption. Goodness, fallenness and redemption. He said that is a cycle that we can follow to understand all of human history, and all of our religion. He said that family, church, economics, government, everything, in fact, that we humans touch, gives off both the original scent of goodness and the foul odor of fallenness, and requires the long, slow work of redemption. That’s what we need to learn, according to Philip Yancey - to truly understand what it is that we are worshiping, who we are worshiping and who we witness for. That is the plot of human history - the plot of the story.

Goodness, fallenness, redemption. The plot begins with goodness, but it doesn’t hang on very long.

Now, I do not believe that Adam and Eve were actual human beings, nor do I believe that the Garden of Eden was actually a place; but the story is truth in metaphor, the same way the Parables weren’t true. There was never a Good Samaritan who actually came along the road. Jesus told that story as a metaphor for how we are to live and learn from those stories. Now the Parables, while not being historically accurate, didn’t make them any less truthful - any more real in our hearts. The same way with the story of Adam and Eve. But they do provide metaphoric truth, and I would like to explain some of that.

The Garden of Eden was a beautiful place and I believe that is also a description of Heaven. There was Heaven in goodness. It fell, and now we are trying to reconstruct that Heaven in redemption. The garden was beautiful; everyone in it felt supported and equal. They all felt peace and comfort. In the Garden of Eden, there was no pain - physical, emotional or spiritual. We want to be in the Garden of Eden again.

Now that goodness was not unconditional. We know the story about the serpent who tricked them, and then Adam and Eve made a bad decision that they wanted to be like God. They wanted to know the difference between good and evil. They wanted to have control over the Garden of Eden, so they ate of the tree of knowledge, and God always answers our prayers, whether they are good ones or not. So, sure enough, God said, "Alright, you want control? I will give it to you." And look at what happened when we take control away from God. We fell that fast. Only through the power of God's spirit could the Garden of Eden sustain. And, when it fell, all of the horrors of this world came about, and we moved that fast from goodness to fallenness.

It is sad, and I don't need to spend a whole lot of time preaching on the fallen. My Lord, if there is something we are good at, we can spot fallenness in the evils of this world. You just listened to Bill's prayer - that wasn't fallen, by the way - but everything in it was. Oh, my gosh, a dictator would take chemical weapons and spew them on his own people. That is the perfect example of fallenness! But we can blow up our own families. We can destroy our own lives. You don't have to go to Syria to watch fallenness take place.

But before we give up on this life and become fatalistic - without hope - there is a third part of that cycle. We have lost our goodness - most of it, anyway - but we don't have to remain fallen. We can have redemption, and I want to quote, I want to read a quote: *It is true of Christendom as of humankind that its fall came so briskly on the heels of its creation as to make the two events seem almost as one.* That was Marilyn Robinson, the great novelist. *But, she continues, the great recurring theme of biblical narrative is always "rescue." God rescued Noah and his family, God rescued the people of Israel from Pharaoh - rescued those from the terrors of the wilderness. God rescued us through Christ's redeeming work. The idea that there is a remnant too precious to be lost, in whom humanity will in some sense survive, has always been a generous hope and a pious hope.* It is a beautiful quote that she gave.

But Philip Yancey (back to him again) brilliantly pointed out that hope really should be taken out of her quote and what should be inserted is the word "redeeming." We survived by generous redemption and pious redemption that was brought about by Jesus Christ. But, Yancey says, we have really ruined this idea and devalued this idea of redemption.

"Redemption" was a beautiful word when it was originally written into the English Bible. When the first English Bibles were written there was slavery everywhere. The ones who were writing out the Bible and translating it into English knew very well about slavery all over the world. They wrote redemption because there were certain groups - especially religious groups - who would purchase a slave. They would redeem that slave, and then let that slave go free. There were individuals and religious groups and churches who would gather as much money as they could to buy a slave to redeem them at the sale and let them go. That is powerful. And, they did it over and over again. Can you imagine that, when we were passing the plate, it was to save an individual slave's life - their very dignity? And as much money as we could get, to pay for that one more human being from enslavement, we were redeeming them. That was powerful imagery.

But what do we redeem anymore? We have lost the meaning. When I was a little boy you saved S & H Green Stamps. Now, if you are under 50 [years old] you have to ask some of us older people what that meant. And, I remember. Oh, man, my mother put me in charge

of the green stamps. At the end of the groceries [when you paid for them] the cashier would rip the green stamps off [and give them to you]. I kept track of the books. You would lick them - they were gross - and stick them into the booklets.

I remember one day going to the redemption center. This was a big place in a strip mall, in St. Cloud, Minnesota, at that time. We went inside and I carried in those 14 books. We looked around - and you couldn't buy anything. You could only redeem the booklets. There was everything from lawn mowers down to toasters, and everything in between, and underneath there was no price tag. It was how many books you had to have to get your item.

We went around that day, looking, and because I felt like I had the books, I was in charge of helping pick. We [Scott and his mom] negotiated until we walked out with a blender. [Laughter.] Now, I had my eye on a bicycle in the back - this is where parent-child negotiations take place. By the time we left with the blender, I had an agreement that my mother would make once-to-twice-a-week an orange thing that was every bit as good as an Orange Julius in that blender. And, that is how we ended up with the blender. I held her to those Orange Juliuses. [Laughter.] That was about the closest thing that I could remember to redeeming.

Now, for younger people, and luckily in Iowa and I think Michigan and maybe one other place, we get stuck with that 5- or 10-cent tax on bottles. You go to the redemption area at the grocery store where you take all of your boxes of bottles and cans, and you redeem them for 5 cents each. That is about it.

That is a far cry from the redemption of buying a human life back. So, when we read "redeem" now it doesn't mean anything. You have to remember what was initially read in the saving of a life from slavery, to what it means to what Christ did redeeming us on the cross, and through his Resurrection. That brings real meaning to this passage.

When the book of Revelations was written, it was used with pictures. I continually hear people say to me, "I don't want to hear anything about that." And it's not just people who aren't well read. Martin Luther said, "Revelation didn't reveal anything to me. I don't want to read it," and he tried to have it taken out of the Bible - that, and the book of James, because he said it was Epistles' crow, but that is another story for another time.

As wise as Martin Luther was - he missed the boat. I *love* the book of Revelation, because everything in the book Revelation you can find in the Old Testament - and a lot of it you find in the creation story. When the book of Revelation talks about the new Heaven and the new earth, he describes the Garden of Eden. In it there are trees, there are rivers, there is everything beautiful that is described, and it fits so clearly with what was described in Genesis, at the opening chapters - in chapter 3 of Genesis. It describes what Revelation lifted up. It is just beautiful imagery. So, I believe that the book of Revelation is a powerful visual for what will happen and what Heaven will look like; and, I think Heaven is a restoration of the Garden of Eden.

Now, in his book, "The Creators," the former Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin, contrasted the Judeo-Christian understanding and view with other ways of looking at the world, and how we relate to God. He said Buddhists have little interest in beginnings or

ends, they are trying to escape the problems of this world. He said Hindus and Muslims submit to it. But, he said, the only group that really embraces art and science and making change is the Jewish community and the Christian community. He [Boorstin] said on Jewish and Christian's soil there is hope, because of our instinct to struggle against this deformed world, stemming from our belief that we play a role in its redemption. In the Buddhists mind, you escape it so that you can get beyond this world and find nirvana. You are not changing, if you are leaving it.

In the Hindu and Muslim experience, you submit to it - but you are not changing it. But with Judaism and Christianity, you are taking the fallenness of this world and you are not accepting it. You are not fleeing from it. You are *fighting* it. You are saying, this is *unacceptable* and, because of the power through the Holy Spirit, together we have the ability to overcome it. We can bring about redemption of the world through the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost, to make real and lasting change. So, the cycle of goodness and fallenness and redemption are all elements of the same Christian story.

Many today deny that the world was created by a good God, because they see so much bad - and that human beings play a central role in this world. No. It's all just an evolutionary movement and we can't change a thing. You know what happens when that is your fundamental belief? You don't really have a clear idea of good or evil, or of worth or meaninglessness, because nothing matters or changes.

Those who have no hope of redemption end up with a view of history like Shakespeare's Macbeth. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing. But, that is not the Christian story. The Christian story witnesses to a tale told by searchers full of sound and fury, signifying Christ's redemptive work through his life, death and Resurrection. That's not nothing. The witness brings redemption to a world in need of hope. We signify that in worship. We signify it in our Christian Education. We signify it when Nora and Evie [girls baptized that morning] are baptized. And, when we baptize them, to say, "No. We are *not* putting up with this anymore, and they are going to help us - all of us - as a family of God together, to no longer put up with this horrid world. We are going to redeem it, one step at a time."

We did that last night. There were a whole lot of people at bars last night. There were a lot of people doing all sorts of things that were entertaining for themselves. But I defy them to have as much fun as the hundred or two hundred people in The Commons last night, because some of you frankly were pretty hysterically funny-looking. [Laughter.] Some of you embarrassed me. [Laughter.] And, by the end of that evening we had had a redemption moment, because not only did we have a heck of a good time - that I would defy anyone to have a better time than we did - but, we went home and got up this morning, not with a hangover, but with a sense that we had made a difference in this world. There are homeless people that are being fed today because of what we did. There are children, next fall, who will get back packs and all we did was have a heck of a good time. But look at the difference we made together. We were part of that redemption moment. We are not going to put up with the way this world is. We are going to make it better and we are going to have fun doing it.

We are going to do it together - witnessing to God now and always. For it is in Jesus' name that we pray and we fight together. Amen.