



2021 Pentecost Offering sermon

“You Will Be My Witnesses”

Acts 2:1–21

*By the Rev. Dr. Ray G. Jones III, Director of Theology, Formation & Evangelism,
Presbyterian Mission Agency*

“You will be my witnesses,” said Jesus.

We have no other purpose or calling than to be witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the flesh and blood manifestation of the invisible God. We bear witness to a beautiful, wondrous way of life that cannot be destroyed.

Because the life of Jesus continues beyond the grave, Luke wrote a second book, The Acts of the Apostles. Luke records that Jesus rose up off the slab of stone on which his dead body was placed, and he walked out into the world with enduring life. He appeared in face-to-face meetings with his followers over a period of about six weeks. They shared meals together and engaged the reign and will of God. The very intention of God continues to be that all God’s people will experience restoration and flourish.

The gospel writers recorded that this time with Jesus beyond the grave was filled with awe, excitement and fear. Their heads must have been spinning over the meaning that death cannot destroy the way of life they had been engaging together. Oh, there had to be so many questions! When do we get started? How is all this going to work? Are we starting a new religion? Scripture records that they do ask this question: “Will Israel be restored now?” Jesus responds by saying, “You don’t get to know that right now, but what you will receive is the Holy Spirit.” He then implores them to wait on the Holy Spirit so they will have the power needed to be witnesses in this beautiful and broken world in which we live.

They do wait, and the Holy Spirit comes upon them while they are gathered in Jerusalem, with a diverse group of people from around the known world, on the Day of Pentecost. As they are gathered, the Holy Spirit appears as wind and fire, and the people hear the apostles speaking in their own native languages. There is no translation from one language to another. There is no sense that one language is more important than another language. People have an intimate experience of hearing about the essentials of life in their own language. God’s intimate encounter with people from all over the known world carries a message that you are important. You are loved. You belong. It’s an echo from the deepest source of our existence — our very beginning. It’s an experience of our original intention and purpose to love God, love one another and care for this good earth.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, the movement of God continues. You are now my witnesses, and you have the power to feed the hungry people around you, walk with people who are lonely and welcome people who are strangers. You will be my witnesses through your actions and words. You will be my witnesses by the way you worship, serve and include people. No one is to be left out. For this reason, the call to bear witness includes Samaria, the very place that Jewish people were taught to exclude, ignore and reject.

But we don't live in a world in which all people and languages are recognized as important and necessary for the human journey. We live in a world of injustice and madness. We inhabit a planet filled with pain and suffering. We are called to bear witness, to live the life of Christ in the midst of racial injustice and a world dominated by the practices and policies of white supremacy. In our present context, in which 500,000 Americans have died from COVID-19, parents and children are turned away at our border and African Americans are killed for simply having darker shades of skin, we are called to bear witness.

This message of Pentecost is essential to the life of the church. In a broken world of injustice, we cannot be witnesses to God's enduring, strong love and engage this ministry of restoration without the power of the Holy Spirit. And, yes, this is the very same Spirit through which Creation came into being. The power of the Holy Spirit centers and settles each of us in the presence of God to encounter our original purpose of love. When we encounter this original intention of God, we are at home: our languages are important, we matter and we are loved. The Holy Spirit gives us the power of God's purpose, which is manifested in our witness.

In the very midst of the struggle with injustice and oppression, we will be tempted to give up and go another way. But when we are tempted to give up on the cause of justice, we are called to wait on the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers our mission by evoking sacred memories of moments when we felt alive and loved and experienced our original purpose. These are the moments when our language, words and experiences are affirmed as important and necessary. These are the moments in which we know that our life's purpose is to be witnesses to the way of God in Jesus Christ.

Let us pause now to settle into moments of grace, love and inclusion that we have experienced. As I share some of these moments from my life, I pray experiences from your journey will rise up and give you the strength and power you need to continue to bear witness to God's transforming and gracious love.

I grew up in a difficult family. My family of origin was driven by fundamentalist Christianity and parents who struggled with mental illness. As I child, I was often surrounded by narrow-minded prejudice and deep fear. I knew down in my soul that the terror of my childhood home was not to be my destiny. My purpose was connected to, and supported by, Holy Spirit moments in which I experienced the presence of God in others. Those Holy Spirit moments caused me to know that a frightened little boy mattered, and that I was loved beyond imagining. That my life was filled with purpose.

I do not remember her name, but she was a Sunday school teacher in my childhood church. What I remember well is that when I was around her, I heard the message of God in my own context and language. And the message was: You belong, and you matter, just as you are. It was an intimate connection with God and purpose. The same purpose we are all born with since the beginning of Creation.

More than 10 years ago, I had such high hopes for our country during the Obama administration. But I had a false sense of hope that we were coming together as a nation, that we were making progress in the struggle against the sin of racism. And then the world was shaken by the killing of African Americans studying Scripture in Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. A white supremacist young man killed nine innocent people inside that church because of their skin color. I remember watching intently the worship service for those who had been murdered, and I was hanging on every word President Obama was speaking in the service that day.

I remember him weaving together words of comfort and healing in the midst of a national tragedy, while also trying to address the racial divide in this nation. Then, he stopped talking and paused. There was silence that seemed to last forever. I am not sure how long the silence actually lasted, but what came next surprised me, and obviously surprised the congregation, too. The president started singing the hymn "Amazing Grace." And I remember that Holy Spirit moment of hearing God's message in my own language. I remember being transported back to the original intention for Creation: love God, love one another and care for this good earth.

I have been attending the Presbyterian Youth Triennium since 2010. This special week, in which thousands of youth and young people gather to experience the love of God and to be formed in the faith, is full of grace and wonder. Every Triennium is a time for me to witness the beauty and power of our faith. This gathering is another important context in which the Holy Spirit is at work empowering both youth and adults to be witnesses to the enduring love of God in Jesus.

As an adult with responsibility for the event, the days of Triennium can seem endless. But by the end of the week, there is always a keen sense of having been on holy ground. All the diverse voices are heard and affirmed as necessary for the journey ahead. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are experienced deeply in the worship, small groups, activities, meals, and the many conversations between old and new friends. It is the power of the Holy Spirit moving through our lives and the events of the week that transport us back to our original purpose: to love God, love one another and care for this good earth. And we commit again to the simple and difficult journey of bearing witness.

The Pentecost Offering supports the Presbyterian Youth Triennium and the faith formation of our youth and young adults. Making a gift to this offering is not simply a good way to support the work of the church, but it is a wondrous way in which we are able to bear witness to an enduring way of life that is changing each of our lives, as well as the life of this world. Yes, this is my witness. This is your witness.

"You will be my witnesses," Jesus said. But wait on the Holy Spirit. There is much work to do. There is the work of healing, including and reconciling for which the world is longing. And remember, as we bear witness, we have been given what we need for this journey: teaching, prayer, worship, one another, possessions to share for the healing of our neighborhoods, and the power of the Holy Spirit to engage God's mission of healing and restoration.

Amen.