

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: We Are All Witnesses

Anthony Ballard

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Scripture:

Acts 1:1-8

Jesus Taken Up into Heaven

1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with^[a] water, but in a few days you will be baptized with^[b] the Holy Spirit."

⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Transcript:

Good morning.

It's always weird because I just preach in there and then, I run over here and do it all over again, and it's like, haven't you guys heard this? But you haven't heard this, so it's new. If you don't know me, my name is Anthony Ballard and I am the director of discipleship here, and today's scripture comes from Acts chapter one verse one through eight, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven. After giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proves that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God."

"On one occasion while he was eating with them, he gave them this command, do not leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift my father has promised, what you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. They gathered around him and asked, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, it is not for you to know the times or the dates the Father has set by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. And you will be my witnesses in Judea, in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Jesus, make us your witnesses, use my words to inspire us and to encourage us to do what you command us to do. I pray this in Jesus name. Amen.

So let me open this sermon with some big news. This is my first time preaching as a married man. I got married the day after Christmas and before I got married though, I had a lot, a lot, a lot of experiences in weddings. I had been a groomsman eight times before that. I had DJ'ed five weddings and I even officiated two all before I got married myself. So I like to think that I was a wedding professional and if you're single and you desire to be married, you just got to do a few more DJing gigs and you'll get there, trust me. There's this romantic comedy movie that came out in the early two 2000s called 27 Dresses, and I thought I was going to make the male version called 27 Tuxedos and I almost got there.

Being in a wedding party, if you've ever been in one, it's fun, right? There's a lot of honor that comes with it, when someone asks you to be in their wedding, to be their groomsman or to be their bridesmaid or the maid of honor or best man. I think that the highest honor in a wedding actually comes through being a witness, when you're asked to be an official witness to someone's wedding. Because it turns out you don't have to have a bridal party, but a marriage is not legal unless you have two people sign the wedding license as witnesses. So Sarah and I, we asked my mother-in-law and my grandmother to be our

witnesses and my mother-in-law almost cried when we asked her. They were more excited I think, than we were to tell people about it because they posted on Facebook as soon as they were able to and my grandmother probably got more likes on her post than I did. I would say that they were really good witnesses because that's what witnesses do, they see and then, they tell. A witness is someone who sees and hears and then, to testify means to tell people about it. The full context of Acts, this Acts passage, Jesus is telling us to do that. Before that, Jesus was dead, right? He was fully dead and after he resurrected in his body, he proved this by doing things we all like to do like eat food because a ghost cannot eat, so he proved that his body was real, but he says to his followers like, "You've seen me do the incredible. Now, go tell people about it." And he tells them to do it in specific places to specific people. He says, "Do this in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth."

So what do these places mean for us today? Well, first, it's a foretelling for the rest of the Book of Acts because as you read through, the apostles and the disciples are spreading this gospel throughout these regions, in these areas, step by step, day by day until we have an established Christian movement. Now, this is why we're all here in this room today. In 2023, in Seattle and Bellevue, what do these locations even mean? Why do they even matter for us in our part of the world? One way to think about it is not as location, but as people. Jerusalem, think about Jerusalem as your hometown, your friends, your family. Judea as your culture. These are people who are like you, who like some of the same things that you like. Samaria and if you remember, Jews and Samaritans did not like each other.

They were enemies, but here comes Jesus making us do something that we don't want to do, as always. So think of these people as people you dislike, people who are your enemies. In the ends of the earth, these are people and places that don't have a connection to Jesus, that don't know him at all. So who are your friends that need to know him, your groups, your enemies and who may be on your ... what places and people groups have a tug on your heart and you just want them to know Jesus so bad? If that's you, chances are, you are called to missions in some form. In some cases you might have to take this literally. My wife, she lived in Israel for a year. So at one point she was literally supposed to be witnessing in Jerusalem, and if she didn't, she would've missed a big glaring thing in scripture. The key here in this whole thing is that the church does not exist just to exist.

The church exists to be a witness to Jesus Christ. We are commissioned to be on mission, and that is why the second half of the sermon series of storytellers, we are going from telling our story about how Jesus transformed our lives and made us into who we are to now, telling this story of the gospel to people who don't know it. We call these gospel

conversations or evangelism. So, we've said, from now until Easter, we have this spiritual focus, whereas a congregation we want to have 1200 gospel conversations, and if all of us as a church have one ... just one time talk about Jesus who doesn't know him, we will more than achieve this goal, more than achieve this goal and BelPres I'm happy to say that as a congregation of 2000 plus weekly attenders, we have collectively reported 51 gospel conversations.

1200 gospel conversations. We have 51. We got some work to do. I say that not to shame us because Jesus doesn't shame us, but the question is, has Jesus done anything for you that's worthwhile? Has he changed your life in any way? Has he healed you or someone you love? Have you heard any story about him? Has he just been compelling in any way? If the answer is yes to any of those things, he says, not me. "Tell people. Tell them who I am. Tell them what I've done for you. Tell them how I left the 99 and came after you. Be my witness." That's what he says. So if you haven't had this gospel ... if you have had this gospel conversation already, we actually haven't been clear on how easy it is. It actually is super easy. It's just three clicks.

We made it intentional, it's your name, your email address and then submit. That's all you have to do. It's not like a whole story thing. So it's really easy to share your gospel conversation if you had one. I think that when we don't witness, part of the reasons we don't witness is because we've actually become members of the mafia and not like disciples. Let me explain what I mean by that. I like mafia movies, so I like Godfather, Goodfellas and the Untouchables and I watch even the documentaries and all that stuff. It's just one of my favorite genres of movies. In all gangster movies, there's a unifying trope and that is that gangsters never testify. Gangsters ... who said, "That's right?" Gangsters never testify. In the movie Goodfellas, there's this scene where the main character is arrested and he has to go to court and he has to give a testimony, but he actually doesn't say anything because he doesn't want to be a snitch.

Robert De Niro tells him after. He says, "Today you've learned two valuable lessons." Some of you know this, I can hear it. "Never ratting your friends and always keep your mouth shut." Unfortunately, that's how some of us have become to treat evangelism and talking about Jesus. The worst thing a gangster can do is give a testimony because testifying is snitching. So when Jesus was arrested and people asked Peter if he knew Jesus, what did Peter do? He denied knowing him. He was asked to be a witness, but Peter refused. So next time you have an opportunity to testify ... is it already up there? Yeah. That's the question you need to ask yourself. Am I being a good gangster or am I being a good disciple? That's what you need to be asking yourself.

So keeping your mouth shut, hey, it's a good thing if you're a gangster, if you're in the mafia, but when you're disciple, it's not good. Also, if you're here today and you are in the mafia, we do have prayer ministers available after services. Linda flicks nodding her head. Pentecostal churches used to have these services called Testimony Services and there would be no sermon. It would just be the congregation getting up, telling their testimony of what Jesus has done for them. In these moments, when someone was saying something really good, a person would shout out, "Testify," and then someone would keep going and get really hyped. When they were done they, someone would say, "Oh, that man was telling on Jesus." And that's how we want to be in our lives. We want to be people who are telling on Jesus. In other words, snitches for Jesus.

In our context in America and in Bellevue, the main reason that I think we don't witness is because we're afraid of sharing our faith with others, because we might come off as pushy, not respecting the beliefs of other people. At worst, we might lose some friends. Something I want you to remember in our witnessing, is that snitches get stitches. Okay? Snitches get stitches because witnessing is risky. Things might happen and sometimes things might not happen. Last week when Pastor John Kim preached, he had a guest join him on stage we called him Pastor M. Pastor M has a full name, but we only shared a letter for his safety because in the particular area of India where Pastor M resides, he's in a position where witnessing for Jesus is risky and dangerous.

The Greek word for witness is the same word we have for martyr. When we hear the word martyr, we think of someone who's killed for their faith or their beliefs, which is true, but originally, a martyr was someone who witnessed. They had saw something amazing and they went and talked about him. Through history, martyr has become associated with Christians who were persecuted and killed for their faith in Jesus. This is true. Those early Christians were often killed in extremely cruel ways, and this was so prevalent that the word for witness now means something else entirely. This isn't just for history, but it's for Christians around the world today like Pastor M. What I love about Pastor M is that he had changed his name and in changing his name, he's basically said, you can change my name, you can take away my safety, but you will never take away my witness.

So for us Christians in America, regardless of our ethnicity, I really do think we don't have to fear for our lives when it comes to this, and I don't make that statement lightly. The worst that can happen though is that we might get scolded for being Christians. We might get called bigots, judgmental, superstitious, misogynistic and any other negative stereotype. Some of you are like, "Yeah, that's pretty bad." I agree, but those are only stereotypes. There's a TED talk about the danger of a one-sided story by Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie, and she says "The problem with stereotypes isn't that they're untrue, but that they're incomplete." Unfortunately, Christians have earned some of these titles that we get, but the complete story is that Jesus calls us disciples who are marked by his love.

Jesus calls us people who are redeemed and set free from whatever stereotype that may have been true about us. So, I want us to not be hindered by the stereotypes that are given to us because the Bible says, "That there is therefore now no condemnation for those or who are in Christ Jesus." So, as Christians, we do have some work to do. We have some repairing to do, but we are free also to be witnesses. So I can't promise that we won't get hurt, that we won't get embarrassed here or there, but I can promise you that snitches get stitches and that is worthwhile in the long run, because it's really going to be okay when we do this. However nervous we are, it is going to be okay because every time Jesus sends his disciples out in each recording, he always gives the Holy Spirit to go with us.

In Matthew 28, it says, "Therefore, go make disciples of all nations." And it says, "And surely I'm with you always to the very end of the age." In Luke 24, Jesus says, "You are witnesses of these things. I'm going to send you what my Father has promised, that is the spirit, but stay into the city until you have received power from on high." In John 20:21, Jesus said again, "Peace be with you as the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that, he breathed on them and said, receive the Holy Spirit." So he knows, Jesus knows that this is not an easy command at all. He knows this, and that's why every time he gives us a power up, which is the spirit. I love Acts chapter one, verse eight in the Amplified Bible because it says, "You will receive power and ability when the spirit comes on you."

"And you will be my witnesses to tell people about me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the earth." Power and ability. Can you guys say that with me? Power and ability. You don't need to know all the theology. You don't have to have all the scriptures memorized. You might stutter or stammer, but the Holy Spirit does not stutter or stammer, and the spirit is within each of you. So a couple of weeks ago, Pastor Scott was preaching and he talked about how we have more opportunities to have these gospel conversations, but we usually play dodgeball and avoid them. They usually come looking for us. I actually want to share a story about the time I played dodgeball. It is probably the worst case scenario that you will ever hear.

It happened a year ago, and I was preparing to write a sermon to preach here at BelPres. And the worst thing, the greatest fear of every writer and every public speaker happened to me. A few days before I had to preach, I lost the file of the latest version of the sermon. I lost about 2000 words, which was less than half of what I needed for a whole sermon. So I had just an outline and some notes and stuff left. I was freaking out, and it was so crazy, this

is going to sound a little crazy, but Pastor Annie actually prayed for my computer that the file would come back because she had witnessed this happen before, but it didn't happen this time. So, I went to the Apple Store, hoping that they could help me recover the file and long story short, they cannot recover the file, it was gone.

The guy who was helping me said, "Hey man, I'm sorry, but for what it's worth, it looks like whatever it is you're working on is really important." I said, "It is." Then I left the store.

Here's the worst part, the title of that sermon was "Believe the Good News." I said nothing to this man about the good news that I believed, but I shared it with you guys, but not with him. So I could come up with all kinds of reasons about how I was nervous, how I was freaking out and stressed out about how I had to rewrite most of the sermon, but there is no excuse. I played dodgeball. So, when Pastor Scott tells you, don't play dodgeball, you can listen to him if you want. If I say, don't play dodgeball, don't play dodgeball because I'm the dodgeball champion.

No one ... I don't think you can beat that, but there is another story that I have. It happened when I was going to propose to my now, wife and I was going to buy her a ring. The guy who was helping me buy the ring, he looked at me and he said, "Oh, what do you do for a living?" And I thought about dodging it and I was going to say, "Just an artist," but then, which is true but then I said, "I also work at Bellevue Presbyterian Church." He said, "Oh, so you're a pastor?" And I was like, "Not really but whatever, sure." Then, he said, "Well, pastor," and he rolled up his sleeve of his shirt and he said, "I need you to pray for me." On his sleeve was full of eczema, the worst I'd ever seen, had open wounds and all that stuff. He said that he can't sleep at night because it's so painful.

So, in that moment I thought about, I'll pray for him later, but then I said, "No Holy Spirit, I'll pray right now." So, I actually touched his arm, which is not like me. I touched his arm and I prayed for him in that moment. I said, in Jesus name. Amen. He said, "In Jesus name. Amen."

So we did a thing and all that stuff, but a week later I had to go back to approve some of the designs for the ring. When he saw me, he said, "The pastor is here, the pastor is here." I was like, "Oh my gosh, these people in the store, all this stuff." When we sit down, he looks at me, he says, "Look," and he rolls up his sleeve and guys, I kid you not, his arm was healed, there was barely anything there. It was so crazy, I was like, "Whoa," when he rolled up his sleeve, I couldn't believe it.

This other guy who worked there came, he said, "Oh, you prayed for him, right? Isn't that amazing?" I was like, "Yeah, it's amazing. I can't even believe it. I couldn't even believe what had happened, the thing that I had prayed for." All that to say that no one in that store converted to Christianity that day. However, they were all witnesses to what Jesus can do,

and both those stories happen here in Bellevue, just along Bellevue Way, not far from here. You don't have to go far for a gospel conversation to happen. I don't think I have the gift of evangelism actually, but I've witnessed Jesus work enough from the lives of other people, that I know what he can do. I've seen Jesus heal, and when I haven't seen him heal, I've heard stories about it.

That's what gave me the confidence to lay hands on him, but what healed him was the power and ability that comes from the Holy Spirit, which you all have. I know this because I'm not ordained. I have no special presbyterian superpowers, okay? Meaning I'm just like most of you, I just happen to be on stage. I don't know how ... they just gave me a mic and I'm up here, but I have no superpowers, guys. I'm like you. The Holy Spirit gives us the power and ability to do things like that, to minister and speak with people. So you don't always have to see it, sometimes you just have to hear it, hear the story, and that's what faith is all about. That's what this whole sermon series has been about. Storytellers, hearing the stories of other people and knowing that that's what Jesus can do.

Jesus says in John 20, it says, "Jesus told them, because you have seen me. You have believed, but blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." When we hear the witnessing of other people, it actually makes witnesses out of all of us. And early in LeBron James's career, the basketball star, there was a Nike campaign that was created, that was titled, "We Are All Witnesses." This campaign was an announcement that a new king had entered the basketball court and what we would see would matter in history. So Nike had a press release that said this, "Nike announced the introduction of a new witness integrated marketing campaign celebrating superstar LeBron James. The witness campaign pays tribute to James and acknowledges the legions of fans worldwide who are witnessing his greatness, his power, athleticism and beautiful style of play."

I think this campaign is brilliant because whether you prefer Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, you love LeBron or hate him, it doesn't matter because we are all witnesses. This whole campaign, as you can guess, was inspired by Christianity. The church, the commercials are filled with gospel music. It has a preacher's voice who's proclaiming all the great things LeBron James has done in his life and in his career. The commercial might be a little sacrilegious. That's true, but the point is ... that's not the point, the point is that Nike has made us witnesses of a man made by God, and the church is supposed to make the world witnesses to the God man who is infinitely greater than anyone else. So, that is why BelPres, we are going to have 1200 gospel conversations.

We're going to do this, because Nike also has a campaign that said, "Just do it." So whichever one you need to inspire you, use which one you need. Witnessing ... and I'll

conclude with this, witnessing has a purpose. There's a purpose when we witness, because witnessing is an invitation and it's an invitation to, of all things, a wedding. The Bible calls this wedding, the wedding supper of the lamb, because the Bible doesn't end with doom and gloom. It actually ends with a new beginning. Witnessing in Jerusalem leads to this new Jerusalem that the Bible talks about. It's when Jesus brings heaven and earth together again, just like it was in Garden of Eden, when everything will be right and perfect. The church ... in Revelation 19, the church is the bride, and Jesus himself is the groom.

It reads like this, it says, "Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, the roar of rushing waters and loud peals of thunder shouting, hallelujah, for our Lord God almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory for the wedding of the lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready." The bride is us again. "Fine linen, bright and clean was given her to wear." Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people. "Then the angel said to me, write this, blessed are those invited to the wedding supper of the lamb." And he added, "These are the true words of God." Amen. This is why we share the gospel with people, because it's going to be a party. We're inviting them to a party, to a feast, and there's room at this feast for many, many more people who don't know.

All are invited to the wedding. Our friends, our family, our enemies and especially the people who don't know him. We got to remember something, a wedding isn't official unless it has witnesses. So, at this wedding that Revelation talks about the church is going to be the bride and it's also a wedding where we will all be witnesses. Amen.

Amen.

Amen. Let's pray. Holy Spirit, thank you that you are with us. Thank you that you make us witnesses. Help us Lord, overcome our fear, our anxieties about sharing you with other people. The Spirit is in us. So Lord Jesus, we want to tell people about your goodness, your greatness, how amazing you are. Lord, help us to do that in your name. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Which group is easier for you to witness to, and which is more challenging, and why? Jerusalem (Hometown, family and friends), Judea (People similar to you) Samaria (people you dislike or enemies), Ends of the Earth (people and places where Jesus is unknown).
- Witnessing is seeing, and/or hearing, then telling. Where is one place or person you can be witness for Jesus in the next week?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.