



You Shall Be My Witnesses

TEXT
Acts 1:6–11

April 30, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Over the next couple of months, we are going to study again how the early followers of Jesus lived in a way that showed their trust that Jesus was Lord. This sermon series is called “Living Unafraid in a Frightening World.”

The story of Acts begins this way: The disciples are with the risen Lord. He is teaching them about the kingdom of God, and they ask, “Is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” It sounds like a question about time, like “Is it time to stop for lunch?” “Is it time to retire?” “Is it time to look for a nearby ark?”¹ “Is this the time?”

But this question is more than asking what time it is. They asked this question because they see that life is not as it should be. These disciples followed Jesus. They listened to his teachings. They watched his encounters with the forgotten and overlooked. They know that he sees life differently than others do.

What they are asking is “Is now the time to make things right?” The question is honest, and it is true, and it grows not from curiosity; it grows from worry, I think. It seems to me that many are worried these

days. Do you feel anxious about things? Are you afraid sometimes? There’s more than a little to cause us anxiety.

North Korea continues to test missile launches and display military strength. President Trump announced that the possibility of a major confrontation with North Korea is on the table. Some of you told me this week that you are worried. We live trusting and hoping that nuclear war is something confined to the history books — but maybe not. It is enough to leave one anxious.

Some folks might be asking, “Lord, is now the time to set things right?” There were people marching yesterday and last weekend too — marching because they are worried that the ecosystem of the entire planet is under assault from shifts in the climate. Some, and no doubt some of you, argue that it is just a problem of political hot air. Some will point to the minority of scientists and mostly non-scientists who say there is nothing unusual about what is happening to the earth’s climate. This has happened before; it’s natural.

I hope those folks are right, but I am not convinced. It’s not a strong position to make a scientific argument by challenging the vast majority of the scientific

community. Some make similar choices in denying evolution or the meaningful health benefits of vaccines. The vast majority of scientists tell us, regarding the climate, we have not been here before.

Several years ago, Carol and I vacationed in the Caribbean. We had an opportunity to go snorkeling. I was blown away by the color and beauty of the ocean life — even just under the surface. It is testimony to the creativity of our God. It is artwork.

One guy in our group had obviously been snorkeling before. He would swim down to a coral reef we were near and use his flippers to thrust water against the reef. Algae and other sediment were pushed into the clear waters. Immediately the water was churning with fish. They were bumping into our arms and legs as I watched in amazement as the sea life moved in frenetic fashion feeding on the food that lives in the coral reefs.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association says that reefs like that one are bleaching. In short, the algae and other food sources that live in the reefs are struggling to survive because the waters are warming. The NOAA says that the last three years reveal the most widespread

and most severe bleaching that has ever been recorded. Why does that matter? Well, the coral reefs constitute about one percent of the ocean floor, but they are the habitat, the ecosystem for about 25 percent of the fish in the oceans. If the food for these fish dies, many of these fish will die. The economic impact will be significant. The options on your seafood platter might change or diminish.

But beyond that, there is something spiritually that I find bothersome. This may not bother you in the same way, but I find it unsettling. The NOAA lists endangered marine life — species that are at risk of dying out, going extinct. There are over 2,000 marine species at risk.

I remember a couple of years ago watching Isis fighters in the Mosul Museum destroying art that was thousands of years old. Did you see that? The art was irreplaceable. I thought, “You didn’t create this. Who are you to destroy this art?”

I feel somewhat the same way about the extinction of God’s creatures. We didn’t create the birds of the air and the fish of the sea; we should not be casual about their destruction.

That may not worry you in the same way it does me. But it bothers a lot of folks. I think this is why folks were marching last week on Earth Day and again yesterday. They are asking, “Is now the time to set things right?”

Now I need to say, Isis and other forces in the Middle East have destroyed more than art. And each life lost is irreplace-

able. The arrogance with which people dismiss other people is astonishing at times.

Sometimes in our prayers we ask, “Is now the time you are going to set things right?” That’s what the disciples were asking. Their question rises up from a place of faith. They have listened to his teachings. They have watched how he healed and made people whole. They marveled at how he loved in transforming ways. Their question reveals their trust, but also their yearning: Make things right.

Jesus said: *Let me tell you what time it is. Now is the time for you to be my witnesses.* I think this is an important word: to be a witness. *Witness* — that’s not really a word Presbyterians use often, but I think it’s a word we should recover.

Think about this. In court, a witness is called to tell the truth; to just tell the truth that you know. Others may know other truths, see other things, but your witness is just to tell what you see. You may not be right, but your job is to be honest. That means there are two important spiritual practices: what we see, which is a spiritual practice; and what we say, which is a spiritual practice.

Let me invite you to reflect on something. Think about a time you have seen the presence or power or spirit of God in your life or the world. Did you see God at work this week? And if you did, how would you describe it?

Let me tell you some who have born witness to me.

A few weeks ago, Matthew Shepherd shepherded

us through a performance of Bach’s *St. John Passion*. Some of you sang that. As we always do with our concerts, there was a retiring offering. This time it was for the Jewish Vocational Service Refugee Resettlement program.

It made me think of someone I met at NEXT in March. His name is Tom Charles. Tom is an elder in the Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey. He has been chair of the Mission and Outreach Committee of that church, which led him to serve on the Refugee Resettlement Ministry. He has coordinated the resettlement of six refugee families. The last family are Sunni Muslims from Syria.

Tom is a soft-spoken, retirement-aged banker, who holds an MBA from the University of Delaware. In a shaky voice (he doesn’t like public speaking), he said the most faithful thing he has ever done as a Christian is offer welcome to the stranger. The refugees he knows have come from dangerous places; they have spent years in refugee camps and have gone through several years of vetting. They come with nothing but a little hope and a lot of bad memories.

Tom told us that this ministry is an antidote to the fear we have of the stranger. Relationship is the antidote to exclusion. He choked up when he told us that both the most faithful thing and the most patriotic thing he has ever done is welcome the refugee. I think Tom Charles is a witness. In the stranger, he sees the image of God. And he will say so.²

I was grateful for our choir and this church for providing an opportunity to support similar work here in Kansas City.

I think it is a spiritual practice to pay attention, to look for God in ordinary moments, and I think it is spiritual practice to say so.

This past Tuesday, Friendship Hall was full. Chief Emily put on her finest fare, and we did our best to express appreciation for the many volunteers at the food pantry. I watched so many come into the room — some of them dragging walkers and needing a little help to get to their tables. Many folks like that might stay home and have someone take care of them, but not these volunteers. They are there on Tuesday morning or Thursday afternoon because if they don't show up, some folks might miss a meal or two.

I pray often for the day when food pantries go out of business because we have found a way to include everyone in a sustainable economy. But until that day, these folks are witnesses to Jesus just like he asked them to be — because they see the image of God in those in need, and they say so. They know that they really aren't doing mission; what they are doing is treating them like family. I'm glad I got to see it.

On Friday, I visited with my friend Jennifer. She's pretty sick, and she is dealing with the feelings and frustrations that come with this new season. She talked about that with courage and deep faith, and I was moved. She is strong and courageous, and she is not afraid.

We also talked about her ministry. I don't know if she would use that word, but ministry is the right word. Jennifer taught 2-year-olds in Sunday school. She learned all of their names, and she hugged all of them, and she told them that God loved them and that she loved them too. They sang songs and sat together for circle time. For 25 years, she taught 2-year-olds.

In her first year, she taught a little boy named Will. She said the children grow up, but she can still see their 2-year-old faces. Well, Will has grown up, and he won't look like a 2-year-old when Will Breyspraak returns in July to be our Director of Music. I wonder if one of the reasons Will wanted to be in ministry here is because he knows that the love of God can be found here, and there will be others who will love him here. That is something he has known since he was 2 years old.

Jennifer Kieltyka has been a witness, just like Jesus asked.

I could tell you about many more who have been witnesses in my life ... another time.

They asked, "Is now the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Is this not the time you will make everything right? I think there will be a day when God will make everything right. I do not believe that God's ultimate dreams for us will be thwarted; no, that promised day will come. But until that day, he wants us to be witnesses.

So let me give you some homework this week. Pay attention. Look for God to be at work in the people you meet.

And when you see that happen, say something. It will matter. He wouldn't have called us to be a witness unless it would make a difference.

¹This weekend in Kansas City has been one of dramatic rainfall; much of Missouri is experiencing flooding.

²Tom Charles' presentation can be heard at <http://nextchurch.net/2017-national-gathering-testimony-tom-charles/>.

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.