

Acts 2 – Witness

This week's reading starts out with the familiar Pentecost story. Last week, we heard Jesus tell his disciples: ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

In today's reading, that's happening. The disciples are all gathered and the Holy Spirit rushes in and everything changes. Now, they truly can become witnesses.

Galileans who were not necessarily known for the educational status all of a sudden could witness in languages everyone could understand.

Peter, the guy who couldn't even admit to knowing Jesus when Jesus was on trial now can stand up and give this bold speech in front of the crowd.

Focus for a minute on verse 37. After those gathered heard Peter's proclamation, they were cut to the heart. Realizing with horror the truth about Jesus and what had happened to him, they wanted to know, now what do we do now?

Repent, be baptized said Peter. And they did just that...3000 people. 3000 people were so moved by Peter's witness that they turned to Jesus and received the new life that comes in baptism.

This is classic law and gospel – the people hear about Jesus' crucifixion. They're appalled and convicted by their own complicity in killing God's Messiah. But then, they hear that Jesus has been raised...and not only that but they are able to join Jesus in this resurrection life.

This is a story with power. It's a story that has the power to evoke faith and commitment. It's a story with the power to bring hope.

And of course the power behind that is the power of the Holy Spirit. The power of the Spirit acts not only on Peter and the disciples. The power of the Spirit also works on those who hear Peter speak.

Faith comes from hearing....faith comes from hearing the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection that brings us also to new life.

But something happened first to shake people up. This whole Pentecost thing with disciples speaking in tongues shattered what everyone took for granted...what we take for granted. That learning a language doesn't just happen with a gust of wind.

Except it did. This had to be a very disorienting experience. A crazy wind blows in from nowhere....maybe it was sort of like that derecho wind that hit the Midwest last August. Flames appear, also from nowhere. And all of a sudden, all those ordinary people are doing the impossible.

Sometimes it's the most profoundly disorienting events that make us able to hear the gospel news of death and resurrection. We hear those words in a profoundly vulnerable moment and are ourselves drawn into death and resurrection...death of what we may have previously put so much faith in and resurrection to faith in Christ. In a nutshell, that's how this faith thing works.

Walter Brueggemann, a well-known Bible scholar, talks about the life of faith as one of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. The period of orientation is your early faith...you accept scripture at face value, things are pretty black and white, and everything feels secure and makes sense.

Disorientation is when something happens that shakes that early faith. Doubt is often a response, although anger, confusion, and bewilderment are some others. Life doesn't make as much sense and you're less sure of everything you thought was true.

Reorientation is a resurrection-like experience...your faith re-emerges and grows again. But it's not the same as the early faith. It's a faith more capable of dealing with paradox – the idea that two apparently opposite things can both be true.

For example, in this reoriented faith, you can believe both that the creation stories in the Bible are true and that scientific discoveries about the origins of the universe are also true. Things are no longer so clear cut, but you're able to find peace and beauty nonetheless.

The next part is the hard part. Jesus' call to witness didn't end here in Jerusalem. The call to witness was for the gospel to spread from Jerusalem to all of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

The call to witness also didn't end with the first disciples. That call to witness extends to us. Peter's witness begins with a story...the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. He will give essentially this same speech multiple times in the book of Acts.

The other disciples will also tell the story...the story will evolve as they learn how to tell it to different people with different beliefs, although it will stay basically the same...Jesus died and was raised so that we might live a new life.

Paul will tell the story of his encounter with the risen Christ. He will learn how to adapt and tell the story to radically different peoples, at least to the ends of the Roman world.

Your own story is your most important witness. Witness in the 21st Century isn't going to be like it was in the early church, where the apostles stood in the public spaces and started speaking as a crowd gathered.

Too many fire and brimstone street corner preachers and other unhelpful and even harmful Christian witnesses over the centuries have closed some doors. Your opportunity to witness will more likely come quietly in the course of a conversation with someone just about life.

The first thing you have to do is to trust the power of your story. You are here in worship for a reason...somehow the risen Christ has gotten hold of you and won't let go, even if you've had your doubts from time to time. The power of the Spirit *is* working in you. Trust that.

The second important thing is to recognize that witness isn't really primarily about gaining church members. The book of Acts repeatedly tells the story of people being converted and becoming part of the church.

But the reason they did that is because the story they heard gave them hope. That's our call. It's always a happy thing to welcome new members, but what people need most is hope. You might be the closest someone gets to church, but if they are given a reason to hope you've been a good witness.

It's also worth remembering that witness involves both words and actions. Actions done in the name and power of Jesus bring hope as well.

But when you use words, how do you know when and what to say?

Let's go back to this idea of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. People are often most in need of hope...and most open to hearing about your reason for hope...when they are going through something profoundly disorienting...a divorce, the death of a loved one, job loss, grief over all that's happened over this last year.

Writing a faith autobiography is a way to internalize your story that makes it readily available to draw from when you are faced with your own disorienting events. But it can also be the story you tell someone else who is in dire need of hope.

You can find the tool for this exercise on the pandemic worship page at

[http://bethlehemdavey.org/worship in the pandemic](http://bethlehemdavey.org/worship_in_the_pandemic)

First, take a couple minutes to fill in a couple of the spaces with some important events in your life. There should be at least one event that would be described as disorienting...something that shook you up and made you doubtful about what you thought you knew...or something that made you angry or confused or sad.

Now, think through that disorienting event and jot down some answers to these questions. I'll read through them, but they're the ones in bold on the instruction sheet.

- Who played important roles – positive and negative – in the disorientating episodes?
- Looking back, are you able to see what God was doing in the disorienting episodes? (Don't worry if you can't – sometimes it can be hard to see. And be gentle with yourself – don't jump to "God was punishing me." I don't think God works that way, although God is willing to let consequences play out.)
- Have you moved through to reorientation? If so, who and what helped shape that reorientation? What is your sense of God's role in that reorientation?

(allow time)

This is a little taste of your story. It just might be what someone else needs to hear.

On your own at home, go through the whole exercise as outlined on the instruction sheet.

This is your story. It's a story with the power of resurrection in it. It's a story you can trust, because it is after all God's story, too.