

Can I Get A Witness?

Isaiah 43:8-13 & Luke 7:18-23

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time/11th November 2007/Mission Sunday

You have been summoned to court. Not for jury duty. You can't be excused for this. It can't be rescheduled for a later date. The trial won't last for just a day or even a few days. We have all been summoned to court, but not by the county sheriff. We have been summoned to court, not because we have broken the law. The trial is not really about us, although we need to be there – all of us. It's not a criminal case, but a civil case. We have been summoned to court, *by God*. We have been summoned not to sit on a jury, but to be expert witnesses for the trial of the ages. Summoned by God; called as witnesses. So, who exactly is on trial here? None other than *God*. Yahweh, God, is on trial. The questions posed to us are these: *Is God active in history or not? Is God faithful or not? Is God God?*

This is how Isaiah sets the scene for Israel in captivity in Babylon (modern day Iraq). Babylon, with its imposing empire and pantheon of gods, whose many cults that covered the city, confronts Israel on all sides. Israel, in exile, powerless in Babylon, is summoned to the court of the nations, to speak on Yahweh's behalf because *God* is on trial. Are Yahweh's claims for divinity true or not? Is Yahweh the true God of all nations, or just the petty deity of Israel, broken, powerless, exiled Israel? This text is truly extraordinary. Up to this point in Israel's history, in its evolution of their idea of God, Yahweh was understood as the God of Israel. But now we see in Isaiah a theological imagination shattering old images and offering new ones, Yahweh is God of everyone: "I, I am Yahweh and beside me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you. ...Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me."¹

What we have here, as they would say in Britain, is God in the dock, God on trial who turns to Israel and says, "You know who I am, you believe me, you understand my power and my faithfulness, you know what I can do, you have seen me act in history, you know how I prepared a way out of Egypt, you know how I am the one who creates a future out of the ruins of the past, you know me as the one who truly saves. Tell

¹Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 123.

them, tell the nations.”² Yahweh turns to us and says, “You, you are my witnesses.”
Tell them.

That’s what we are, witnesses in a cosmic trial. Christians understand themselves to be in the biggest court case of all. In his book on *Testimony*, Tom Long put it well: “What is being contested is the very nature of reality, and everything is at stake. Was the universe created by a loving and just God, or is the universe a blind and random collection of cold stones and burning embers floating through empty space and unshaped by a creative hand? Are human beings created in the image of God and given lives full of purpose and meaning, or is life a ‘tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’? Are human beings in some deep sense created to be together in communities of trust and harmony, or is the law of the talon and claw our fate? Is generosity a virtue or stupidity? Is sacrifice ever noble, or is it just the losing position in a never-ending battle for power? When we stand at the grave of someone we have loved, can we hope to meet again on another shore and in a brighter light, or is this weak sentimentality and a cowardly denial of the brute facts?”³ Everything is before the jury, and we have been subpoenaed by God to be witnesses. *What do you know? What have you seen? What do you say in God’s defense?*

That’s what John the Baptist was looking for in sending a jury to Jesus. He wants to know where Jesus and his ministry stand in this trial of the messiah – is he or not. Jesus is on trial, like God. “Are you the one who is to come or shall we wait for another?” Are you the real thing or not? Luke tells us that Jesus has just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind (note it doesn’t say all). He says to John’s disciples who just witnessed all of this, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.” *What*

² On the trial speeches in Isaiah see Westermann, 120-126. See also Isaiah 41:1-5 & Isaiah 41:21-29.

³ Tom Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 28. I am indebted in the sermon to Long’s extremely helpful analysis of testimony and witness, 3-38. Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin from Long’s book: “Christians believe that we have been summoned to court to tell the truth in [a] trial. ... We are not on the witness stand to grow the church, to make ourselves look religious, or figure out legal strategy that will ensure that our side ‘wins.’ We are witnesses, and we are here for one and only one purpose: to tell the truth about what we have seen and head.” (29).

does your experience tell you? What do you know? What have you seen? What do you say in God's defense? Tell them.

What does your experience tell you?

What do you know – in your heart of hearts?

What have you seen?

What have you heard?

What would you say in God's defense?

This is the meaning of Christian testimony and witness. It's more than a sentimental account of something Jesus did for you. By witness we mean more than talking someone into being a Christian. This is especially tough for Presbyterians, who are generally in love with words and can talk an issue to death but suddenly become tongue-tied when asked to explain the reasons for the joy within us or what we believe and why. Talking about Jesus and helping another to faith are important, but these terms – testimony and witness – are actually borrowed from the world of the law court. Something or someone is on trial and we are called “to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” We are asked to provide faithful testimony so that the court can make a fair judgment. This is why perjury is such a serious crime, it is bearing *false* witness. Our witness must be true – even if we or others are offended or scandalized by it (as Jesus said), to be true to it even if it means suffering (for who is willing to suffer for the truth?), even if it means losing our life – which is where we get the word “martyr,” which means *witness*.

High on a bluff in St. Andrews, Scotland, above the Royal and Ancient Golf Club and the fairways of the Old Course, is the Martyrs Monument, an obelisk on which are carved the names of the reformers burned at the stake in St. Andrews for their Protestant witness of the gospel. It's probably my favorite place in St. Andrews and it reminds me that sometimes – all the time? – the truth is costly. It is this truth that we are asked to bear witness to in a trial where not we, but God, is on trial.

Not every form of witness is as extreme as death of course, but God still counts on our testimony. Sometimes we witness with *words*. Sometimes we witness with *silence*. Other times we witness with our *actions*. As today is Armistice Day, Veteran's Day Weekend, or in Britain, Remembrance Sunday – the 11th month, the 11th day, the 11th hour on which the armistice took effect ending the Great War in 1918 – it is fitting to remember Elsa Brandström (1888-1948), the daughter of the Swedish diplomat. She served as a nurse during World War I, cared for the prisoners in the prisoner of war camps. She fought against the brutality of the guards, against cold, deprivation, disease, and hunger. She gave food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, strength to the

sick. When the war was over, she initiated a program to care for the orphans of the war prisoners. The theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) recalls meeting her. “We never had a theological conversation,” Tillich said. “It was unnecessary. She made God transparent in every moment. For God, who is love, was abiding in her and she in Him.”⁴

Of course, God is still on trial today, perhaps now more than ever before. If you think about it, every day God is on trial. There are plenty of unreliable witnesses around as well. There are also plenty who have never known God’s love and who have no reason to believe God is faithful. There are many filing charges against God. However, God counts on us tell the world what we have *seen* and *heard* and *felt*. We are called to witness to God’s presence in the world. Through Jesus Christ we know God as savior and healer, as liberator and lover – as One desperately in love with the world. Go and tell. Show and tell. Testify! This is become the context for mission work – our mission is one significant way we witness to the world.

Why do we do mission? Not because we are nice (we are, but that’s not the reason). Not because of some obligation to extend charity or to alleviate guilt for how much we have. We engage in mission, support, and outreach not because we take pity on the less fortunate, but because *as Christians we have a God-sized love for the world, a love that cannot be contained within us, or within the walls of this church, but pours out generously, overflowing down the porch steps to Beechwood into the streets where God’s people live.* That’s where the jury is, out there – a jury that is still out on whether or not God is faithful and just and loving. We know the answer. Yahweh says, “You are my witnesses.” *Tell them.*

“In the middle of winter,” St. Francis (1181-1226) called out to an almond tree, “Speak to me of God!” and the almond tree broke out into bloom. It came alive. There is no other way of witness to God but by aliveness.”⁵

That’s how I like to consider our witness. In the middle of cold, dark winter-like places, we are bold enough to speak of God, and help bring people to life. We speak of aliveness. The early church father, Irenaeus (b.2nd century – d. 2nd/3rd century) once said, “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.” Where are we coming alive?

⁴ Paul Tillich, “The Power of Love,” in *The New Being* (New York: Scribner, 1955), 27-28.

⁵ Elaine Pagel’s Introduction in Thgeih Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), xiii, cited in Long, 19.

Where are we helping people come alive? Our actions are witnesses of life – of God’s life-giving presence in the world. When you leave the sanctuary today, the ushers will be have for you a summary sheet of all the places and people our mission dollars and mission actions witnessed the life of God. It’s amazing. Totaling more than \$80,000. Many are represented in Fellowship Hall this morning. The Cold Weather Shelter, Chesapeake Habit for Humanity, Interchurch Medical Assistance, the renovation of the laundry facilities of the Good Shepherd Hospital in Tshikaji, Congo, and the pediatric ward we renovated in Lubondai, Congo, now completed. Think of the Santi School in Nepal; emergency assistance with rent and BGE bills; Catonsville Emergency Food Ministry; onil stoves and student scholarships in Guatemala. Think of our support of the mission work of the General Assembly and Baltimore Presbytery; the Child Care Center; Congregations Concerned for the Homeless in Howard County. Think of the ways we support peace and justice – Bread for the World, Covenant Network, Peacemaking Offering. Don’t forget the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering and the Christmas Joy Offering, or the mission work of Presbyterian Women. Last summer we sent both Linda Hernandez, to work with Native American Presbyterians in Dakota Presbytery, and Eric Ebersole to Guatemala with youth from the presbytery. Our Crossroads youth will be going to Appalachia next summer.

On and on and on. This is part of our testimony in the cosmic trial of God. When the world says of Catonsville Presbyterian Church, “Speak to me of God!” This is our response. This is what we say and do. Life yielding life yielding life. This is part of our witness. *Thanks be to God!*

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland*