

Bearing Witness to Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Father, we ask that your Holy Spirit would come and touch our hearts to hear your written word and your word proclaimed that we might trust you, walk with you more faithfully today and in the days ahead.

This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Yeah, George is right. We are a little bit of a moving target, but it's wonderful to be back in Canada for a season.

So by way of introduction, I would just simply say, first of all, thank you for many of you have prayed for me and Stella as we've been gallivanting around lately in the last nine years or so in the Global South, Global South countries, which has been wonderful for me as someone who tries to think about the faith in the global sense, local and global, obviously, but also to learn about what God is doing around the world and something that we might try and learn here as well together.

The other point by way of introduction would just be, maybe I'll put it in the form of a question. What is going on these days as a missionary comes back?

Because I'm a somewhat unconventional missionary as a spouse of a diplomat and everything, but a missionary nevertheless, teaching here and there in different settings abroad.

[1 : 3 2] What's going on when a missionary comes back? Well, is it a sort of global crossing whereby the missionary leaves the mission frontier and comes back to headquarters, as it were?

Sort of, but not exactly. Is it the reverse or the reverse so that we can say that the missionary has been sent from a place where Christianity is now thriving and blossoming and come back to a new mission frontier?

Well, yes, partly, but not precisely, not exactly. I think part of the problem is that modern life and technology have virtually abolished that distance between places.

And that's an interesting thing in itself, which I won't try to explore here. I'm sure some of you do better job of that than I would. But if we assume that there are still boundaries to be crossed, that I think it has to do with recognizing the layers that are there that exist in most places, particularly in the world's urban spaces, the ones I know the best, even though I'm living way out in the boondocks, which, by the way, is a word from Tagalog, which I learned way back in the Philippines.

Modern Cairo, which we came from recently, has its cultural layers. The fascinating ones that make life there rich and interesting.

[3 : 1 1] There's the broad Islamic layer, which I'm sure you'd be aware of. There's the Coptic layer, which claims an even more ancient past. And there's the cosmopolitan layer that transcends those first two and takes up a whole array of expats, expatriates, students, diplomats, entrepreneurs, refugees even.

And in the mix would be Egyptians who have a lot of international experience. And that's that third layer, which we came to know the best. As far as I can tell as an immigrant in Canada, you can probably tell from my accent I'm not exactly a local, I think there are at least three layers here, too.

You can identify the largely Christian one, where you still hear echoes and catch glimpses of a landscape, of a Canada that thought of the nation's identity and calling in pretty much biblical terms.

He shall have dominion, right, from sea to sea. And then there's the layer that I encountered when I first came back in the 80s. And that was the layer that promoted and celebrated multiculturalism and that connects most immediately with that cosmopolitan Cairo that I described.

Faith there is largely privatized, right? It's assumed that the important things in life lie somewhere really beyond our churches and synagogues and mosques.

[4 : 57] And then there's that layer that we're trying to come to terms with today. Let's call it a post-multicultural layer, if you like, where individual preference appears to be sovereign, but really isn't anything like that at all.

In fact, there's a new public belief system that is emerging, a new religion that seems to be in the making. Bill C-4, which George referred to a couple of weeks back, I think, a conversion therapy bill, which, as many of you know, passed unanimously and which will take effect in a few days' time, uses language that we'd be familiar with in our multicultural layer, declaring that no particular sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression is to be preferred over another.

It sounds multicultural. It sounds multi-something. In other words, we apparently celebrate our differences. But then comes a massive shift that happened as we were sleeping, it seems, or maybe as the ubiquitous cannabis.

We were inhaling that. I don't know. But we're apparently agreeing that if my aim is to explore a, quote, integrated personal identity, then it can only happen in one direction, because the law will criminalize anything or anyone that encourages me to transition from any non-heterosexual identity or category to a heterosexual one.

Now, Egyptian society and Canadian society are, in this regard, at opposite ends. The distance is palpable.

[6 : 52] But in at least one way, they come together. And I was discussing this with George the other day. You face trouble in one way or another if you attempt to convert in the wrong direction.

What does all of this have to do with Jesus? The word made flesh. Well, I think it has to do with the question of how we get our bearings, how we think of history, even.

Let me ask you, do you think that history has a center? Given the layers that I've spoken about, some people today might say that this sort of question can't really get us anywhere.

They might say if there's any kind of center at all, well, it's behind it. It wouldn't be in history, but it's behind it. For all we know, history is one constant flow, they would say, going nowhere in particular.

And what you see really is an illusion. What's real is in the mind. What's real is what you and I imagine to be real. Others might say, no, there's a center to history, and it's the place where we can feel that steady march of progress.

[8 : 12] We might still have some folks around who think along these lines. It's the place where we know we're making progress as we make the world a better place.

And then others would say, no, there is a center in history, but it's not there. The real center is where you find people trying, through natural abilities, to submit to the way of a religious leader who was given a final and decisive word from God that supersedes all earlier words which have been corrupted.

Well, the problem with these three views is that they leave us stranded in the end, turned in on ourselves and our own devices. In the first, if history is an illusion, and I'm going to try to make sense of my own life, I'm left to put myself at the center of everything.

So the center of history is in my mind, and I'm left to make up what is true and right for myself as I go along, at least until it clashes with what someone else thinks is true and right.

In the second case, if the center of history is a steady but impersonal march of progress, I'm left struggling to make it into a footnote of history.

[9 : 45] I'm left secretly but desperately hoping that the book I'm writing or the institution I founded or the children I raised will really leave their mark so that someone somewhere down the road will remember me.

So that it can be said, in 2022, Jones had one million followers on Twitter. In the third case, if the center of history is in submission to God's latest revelation, then I'm left to rely on my own will and wisdom as I try to make myself worthy of acceptance.

I'm left with just one more system of self-salvation. So either way, we're turned in on ourselves. And here I remember what C.S. Lewis said about that.

Look for yourself, he said, and you'll find in the long run only hatred and loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find him and with him everything else thrown in.

As followers of Jesus, we know that the center of history is found in Christ Jesus, born of a virgin, crucified under Pontius Pilate, risen, ascended, and coming again.

[11 : 12] And all this points to the fact that the Bible reveals marvelous truths about history. The world of space and time had a real beginning, one that we didn't invent.

From Genesis, we know that God made the world and that it was good. From Romans 8, we know that history has a real end, not one that we've come up with, but one that God is himself working out through his loving, providential care.

Creation's wiring, if you like, makes it lean into the future when God's people will be revealed for who they are. Just as we who are his children by grace long for that full adoption and resurrection by the Holy Spirit's power at work in us already.

And at the center between creation and the new creation is the firstborn of all creation. as Colossians 1.15 puts it.

We're talking, of course, about the one who became flesh and dwelt among us in John 1.14. We're talking about Jesus. Who is this Jesus? Well, as we reflect on John 1, 1 to 14 together, one thing needs to be clear.

[12 : 33] The question, who is Jesus, is not an academic question only. In fact, it's not even that primarily. It's a question that's very personal.

That's not to say that every person makes up whatever they like about the question in answer to it. It's that as soon as we look into the question, we find ourselves, our whole identity and our whole purpose bound up with the question.

That is, we're brought to a place of decision. We're brought to a place where we have to engage individually the testimony of eyewitnesses to his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

We're brought to a place where we must say either, yes, I will follow Jesus, or no, I can't go to that banquet right now.

Don't trouble me now, as we sang in youth group, eons, or not ages ago. I think 40 years ago, we sang that in a youth group in Mexico City.

[13 : 43] You might ask, well, why do we need eyewitnesses? Ever pondered that question? Why do we need those eyewitnesses? Can't God just tell us directly without having to use human beings?

Seem a lot more convenient in many places. Presumably God could tell us directly without human eyewitnesses, but is that what he's chosen to do?

As Christians, we take as our starting point, we take our starting point what God has actually done, not what he might have done or what he should have done, you know, if you're thinking like us.

What God has seen fit to do is to come among us in Jesus, in history, and have certain people bear witness to that. That's why John declared in verse 14, as we read, the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory.

Glory as the only son from the Father, full of grace and truth. Now, as much as we might be tempted to brush aside the whole question of reliable human witnesses on the assumption that human witnesses inevitably garble things and mislead us, whenever we do dismiss them, we make a huge mistake.

[15 : 06] That's because the Bible has human witnesses on full display, front and center, if you like, so that to discredit them is to miss something that's at the heart of God's self-disclosure.

It's this bearing witness. If I gave this talk a title, it would be bearing witness to Jesus. Remember how Jesus himself raised the matter of bearing witness to his identity.

In Matthew 16, 13 to 14, we read, when Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, the Roman capital of Judea at the time, he asked his disciples, who do people say the Son of Man is?

They answered, some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Having heard of Jesus, of his miracles, and his teachings, people would have naturally come up with some answers.

They were bound to do that. And Jesus isn't here simply being curious. What he wants, in the first place, is for the disciples to make a report.

[16 : 19] And what is their report? Well, Jesus, what they're saying about you is this. You're either John the Baptist, because you're announcing the coming kingdom, or maybe you're Elijah, because Malachi said that he would come back again.

Or maybe you're Jeremiah, because you talk about a new covenant, as he did. And what does Jesus do at this point? Does he say, well, let me set it straight then, and let me tell you who I am.

No, he doesn't. He says then, so who do you say that I am? And Peter answers, you're the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And Jesus is delighted to hear this, because he says, blessed are you, Simon Barjona. His delight is striking.

Have you wondered why he was so pleased to hear Peter's confession? Is it because he's impressed with Peter? Evidently not.

[17 : 27] I think he's pleased because he has the opportunity, Jesus here, has the opportunity to bear witness to what the Father is doing. That's why he goes on to tell his disciples that Peter didn't come to know this through any natural means, but that the Father revealed it to him.

So Jesus here is bearing witness. Let's appreciate the way God makes himself known here, starting from the human side, because in John 1 it's going to be the inverse. starting from the human side, from below, among the people, there's a kind of knowing that only gets us so far.

Having heard of Jesus, of his miracles, of his teaching, people were naturally going to come up with answers. They were bound to do that because under Roman rule and eager for their liberation, they were naturally going to take an interest in this man who spoke of God's kingdom.

Now, and then among the disciples, Peter comes to know that Jesus is the Christ as the Father reveals it to him. And not just Peter, evidently, because Jesus tells all the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Christ.

What's important is that when Peter declares this truth, Jesus reveals that it's the Father's work in him. And then, as I said, in John 1, we start from God.

[18 : 58] The pattern of witness-bearing begins there, from God's side, from above. In the beginning, says John, echoing the first words of Genesis, in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

What do we learn in these first five verses about this God? Well, first, we learn that there was never a time when God was without Word.

The Word of God always was. He was in the beginning with God, says verse 2. Second, we learn that God has made everything through the Word.

Verse 3, what this means is that creation bears witness, if you like, to him. Because David, it will almost echo David's word in Psalm 19, 1, for the heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

Third, we learn that our God doesn't remain aloof, detached, because it's in his nature to be a God for us. How do we know this? Well, we know it because his Word is life.

[20 : 24] And this life is the light of men, verse 4. So the Father is already bearing witness to himself through creation and through the Word that is the light that shines in the darkness of the world and of our lives, verse 5.

So up to this point, we haven't heard about Jesus yet, right? We've heard, but we do meet him in verse 14 as we've read, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

To lead us to this Jesus, God raises up whom? A witness, John the Baptist, who bears witness to the light that according to verse 9 was coming into the world.

What kind of ministry must John the Baptist have? Well, the kind, first of all, that simply bears witness to the light since he himself is not the light, verse 8.

Otherwise, John the Baptist could have drawn attention to himself, said, hey, come follow me. But instead, he says, prepare the way of the Lord, who is the Son of God, if you read further down, verse 34, and Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, verse 29.

[21 : 48] In the second place, John the Baptist's ministry had to be the kind that convicted men and women of sin, of rebellion. The fact is, God's work in creation is sufficient to move us to gratitude, gratitude, but in our sinful nature, we refuse to do that, to give thanks.

And so that it can be said of us in verse 10, the world did not know him. This is consistent with what Paul has to say in Romans 1 about the human heart becoming darkened through a refusal to honor the God who's made himself known right there in creation.

So bearing similar witness to that of John the Baptist, are eyewitnesses who can say, and we beheld his glory, verse 14.

Who are these who beheld his glory? Because after all, not everyone perceived Jesus' glory. Not everyone received him as one full of grace and truth.

How do we know this? Well, it's clear from what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1 about the message of the cross being foolishness to the Greeks with their passion for human wisdom apart from grace and a stumbling block to the Jews with passion for signs for their own sake.

[23 : 19] So who perceived Jesus' glory? Verse 12 gives us the answer. Those who received him, those who believed in his name.

And who were these? Well, verse 13 answers that. It's the same ones who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of God.

So you and I today, wherever we are, picking up John's gospel and turning right to the end, we can hear God say to us through these early witnesses, these things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name.

You see the, you see how we have the God, God-bearing witness right through his word, creation and then John the Baptist bearing witness, the gospel writers bearing witness and we too being invited and called to do the same.

So how can we turn these truths, how can these truths comfort us today even as they challenge us? Let me just make three brief points.

[24 : 46] The first word of comfort for us today is that by trusting in Jesus we come to know the living God. To receive the light that has come into the world in Jesus is to receive the life of Jesus.

It's to become by adoption what he is by nature. But here's the challenge, isn't it? And it has to do with what the Bible means by knowing God.

We like to trust the sight that our physical eyes give us. We think that it's pretty reliable that to see is to believe.

But what kind of seeing is appropriate to knowledge of God? We have to reckon with John 1.18 a little further down which says no man has seen God.

We'd like to think that it makes no sense to say this any longer this sight of the word made flesh. But the problem is many see without seeing.

[25 : 50] Many people cross paths with Jesus but never had the spiritual eyes to see that he was sent from God. And that's why John Calvin can say no man has seen God means that God dwells in inaccessible light and therefore cannot be known except in Christ who is his lively image.

knowledge. If we then ask what it means to know Jesus God's lively image today the Bible teaches that this knowing is a knowing that's oriented more to the ear than to the eye.

Where do we see that? Verse 18 tells us that the only God who's at the Father's side he has made him known.

Where the literal meaning of to make known is to declare to narrate. So the glory of Jesus was perceived by faith in the beauty of his whole message his whole life and death and resurrection in what one commentator calls the moral splendor of his whole ministry.

The moral splendor of his whole ministry. The second word of comfort this morning is that as we find ourselves in Christ Jesus we're not stranded in history.

[27 : 12] We're not left to turn inward looking for meaning within ourselves. We're not striving desperately to leave footprints that others will admire after we move on.

And we're not left trying to save ourselves either. This is because if we find ourselves in Christ we're already at the only center that matters. The center where we anticipate the resurrection of our bodies and our full adoption as sons and daughters as God has promised.

If Colossians 1:15 calls Jesus the firstborn of all creation it's not because he's the first created being as some imagine. It's that if that's the case our hope is no hope at all.

The verses that follow immediately after tell us exactly what the title first born of all creation involves. It means all things were created in him by him and for him.

That all things hold together. That glorious passage in Colossians hold together in him. That in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. And that all things are to be finally reconciled in him through his sacrificial death on the cross.

[28 : 34] A third word of comfort and challenge for us is that we can experience the joy of bearing witness. Experience the joy of bearing witness. Here we have the privilege of commending the faith to others of trying as Alistair McGrath put it nicely to allow the full wonder and brilliance of the Christian faith to be understood and appreciated.

I once met a pastor in Peru who in his university years had tried on for size the various philosophies that are there and religions only to find emptiness inside and as we went out together doing something I don't get to do often enough but that we did there in Peru and that that was to go out in the parks and town squares just preaching and putting on skits and drawing others to hear the message as we went out together I remember one moment when he turned to me and he said really really full of joy and full of full of conviction apart from the gospel what else is there it was as if he had said like Peter to whom shall we go you have the words of eternal life and we have believed and have come to know that you're the holy one of God John 6 68 to 69 so how can we bear witness within the layers that we that we come to know in different places well I'll just mention three in closing as we hear of great numbers of

Muslims coming to Christ in countries like Iran I think we can be confident today that our message of God's love in Jesus will be used by him to move some to put their trust in him we pray many the Holy Spirit may even be preparing the heart of someone that you meet this week so that when you do speak of Jesus confidently calmly just bearing witness your friend will warm to the message and it won't be through your eloquence it won't be through anything that you had worked on days on end to prepare it'll just be through your quiet witness that this person will seriously consider what you have to say and it's a remarkable thing to see happen my friend a tennis buddy in Cairo he has not yet trusted in Jesus as far as I know but he's someone I was able to talk to on several occasions he was actually praying for my conversion to

Islam right and and very excited you know to discuss things with me and so I took that as a as a good thing he took this stuff seriously and praying for my conversion even as he did that I was I was able to invite him to consider how the resurrection of Jesus if true changes everything changes everything and that Jesus being raised for our justification as Paul says that you and I wouldn't don't have to try to self-justify by our own efforts perhaps in another space or realm God is drawing someone from that cosmopolitan world that we know well in that space where Cairo and Toronto and Buenos Aires meet where it seems like the most important things in life revolve around things that I've had to cultivate a certain amount of well let's just say I need to be ready for the the wine and cheeses and and stuff around the diplomatic life abroad but where conversation revolves around the wines that you import sports and leisure and so on with a bit of maybe philanthropy thrown in but even there we see signs of longing don't we longing for something that only God can satisfy and so perhaps God is in the present in the present pandemic drawing people through this sense that this world after all has an expiry date and moving people to to be aware of their own need and that we too can be be ready to bear witness or consider a modern spiritual but not religious pagan who can make use of the rights and ceremonies of whichever religion is most handy right without taking any of the teachings too seriously it's common enough this person believes that God is a great impersonal energy that flows in and through everything the

Christ and the cosmos are basically the same reality and that the road of salvation that I travel is made as I walk it in other words that I have the power within me to make my road a good one or a bad one and to define what is good and right for me well consider this this is the road many of us tried to walk on until we realized that it leads straight into the land of self-worship and emptiness we walked along it until someone through God's sheer mercy bore witness that Jesus Christ has done the work of laying out the road ahead of us so that we don't have to invent it so let me challenge you with this we've just celebrated Christmas it's the one time when people all over the world Cairo

[34 : 50] Manila everywhere even many who wouldn't claim to be Christians seeing of the things that we've looked at this morning the incarnation the coming of Emmanuel God with us it's a story that has become routine and the wonder of it has been to some extent tamed domesticated for some who sing it it's a message about humanity's nobler qualities perhaps even about humans becoming God or little gods for others it's a nice story but not to be taken seriously as the good news of God's dealings with sinful humanity in real time and place and a real place in history so to hear the message what do we need to do to hear the message we have to listen as it were on our knees as if for the first time we have to consider the awesome paradox that's there in that remember that line from Graham Kendrick some years ago I'm telling you my age again that the hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered and with our whole lives we have to hold on to the glorious hope that the same one who came into the world and who died and rose again and ascended into heaven is the one who's coming back for all those who are waiting for his appearing shall we pray father would you take these songs we've sung and the words we've heard and and burn your truth into us that we might find greater hope greater joy greater boldness to be salt and light in the world that you in the places you've placed us in whichever layers of society that you call us to and give us the opportunity to interact with we thank you for bringing us out of darkness into the marvelous light of your son and we thank you for the health that you give us for the the strength that you give us from day to day this we we ask and pray in

Jesus's name amen amen amen amen Thank you.