

Devoted to Witness

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[0 : 0 0] Someone who was born in Scotland this morning told me that they don't celebrate Christmas there anymore. They celebrate Hogmanay. Has anyone heard of that? Yes.

A bottle of whiskey in one hand, a piece of coal in the other and you go and visit your friends. And I'm not sure what happens to the coal. That's Hogmanay. Acts chapter 2.

Well now, the Bible reveals that God has an enemy. And you remember, during Jesus' earthly ministry, Satan did all in his power to distract and deflect and discourage and derail Jesus from accomplishing God's purpose.

And since Jesus has gone back into heaven, can no longer be tempted in that way. There's a call for someone.

So what the enemy of God does now is that he's turned his attention to the church. And now he does all he can to distract and deflect and discourage and derail us from doing what we should do and being what we should be.

[1 : 1 5] So that we won't be engaged in fulfilling God's purposes for the world. That's why it's so important for us as a church community to be clear about what God's purposes for us are.

I mean, if we miss God's purposes, we may as well pack it up and go home. Surely. When we look to the book of Acts and we see the first church, Luke, the author of Acts, has told us that there are three marks, three pivotal signs of the church where God himself is Lord and Jesus Christ is centre and the Holy Spirit controls the agenda.

Two weeks ago we looked at that first mark and we saw that it was being devoted to the scriptures. That a church that's filled with the Spirit is made up of those who are devoted to God's word, who are seeking to know God through his word.

And their pattern was in their private homes and then in public gatherings to learn of God through his word, to conform their lives in every way they possibly could to what was revealed in the scriptures.

And we began, we traced the hand of God's grace amongst us here and we celebrated and honoured and commissioned those who are working in ministries that serve this first priority.

[2 : 3 7] And then last week we saw that the second mark of the church where God is in control is that it is devoted to fellowship. God gathers us into a community and at the heart of the community is this experience of fellowship, koinonia, not just with one another but with God himself.

God gathers us into a church where God is in control is that this congregation as every congregation is a supernatural entity where God is present, where Christ rules and where God is building us into a spiritual house.

And we saw last week that every church has the potential to be an echo of God's deep purposes in creation as well as the beginnings of a picture of heaven and the heavenly banquet.

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God is in control of heaven and the heavenly banquet. God is in control of heaven and the heavenly banquet. God is in control of heaven and the heavenly banquet. God is in control of heaven and the heavenly banquet. God says, true of God's, mere stay of God. God has natusyth That is why when you come to the end of chapter 2 we read these words, the second half of verse 47, and the Lord, speaking of Jesus, added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

I want to step back for just a moment because Luke, the writer of Acts, gives us two reasons, two foundational reasons why the church is a witnessing body, why we ought to be looking outwards.

And the first reason is that witness is the purpose of God. If you would keep your finger in Acts 2 and turn backward to Luke 24 for just a moment, please.

Luke 24 on page 86. You know that Luke wrote both these books. He wrote the Gospel of Luke and he wrote the Book of Acts.

[6 : 09] And in Luke 24, Jesus has risen from the dead and in verse 46 and verse 47, Jesus himself summarises the message of the Old Testament.

Very interesting. Verse 46. He said to them, Thus it is written that the Christ must suffer and on the third day must rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem.

Here are the three, there are three verbs, the three things that must happen to fulfil the purpose of God. One is Christ will suffer and die.

The second is Christ will rise from the dead. And the third is that that good news will be communicated to all nations, to the ends of the earth. This is very interesting.

Jesus is saying, if you boil it all down, you can summarise God's purposes for the world in three things. The death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ and the preaching of Christ to the ends of the earth.

[7 : 18] It's not that God was very involved in the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus and has floated into the background and said, You get on with the job now, I'm going to leave you to it. The salvation of God and the forgiveness of sins that came through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ now come to the world through the church which witnesses to the gospel.

This is God's purpose. That is what he revealed in the Old Testament according to Jesus. And then he speaks to them as witnesses and promises the Holy Spirit.

It's remarkable, don't you think, that it is just as crucial and important as the death and resurrection of Jesus that the church be faithful in its witness to the ends of the earth. The repentance of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit be preached to all nations.

And just as Jesus was deeply concerned to fulfil God's purpose for him through his death and resurrection, you and I are meant to be concerned to fulfil God's purpose in the same way.

Let's turn over back to Acts chapter 1, shall we? Acts chapter 1, verse 8. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, says Jesus, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[8 : 53] Now, you remember when we looked at this, this is not Jesus' desperate last minute strategy to get the word out about him. Jesus is in fact quoting from the book of Isaiah and the scene in the book of Isaiah, you remember, is that God, the Lord of all the earth, has called all the gods and God is setting up a trial scene, a law court, where it's going to be decided once and for all who is the true and living God.

And he says to the other gods, you call witnesses and I will call witnesses. And he says, my people will be my witnesses. And what's remarkable about this is that Jesus himself now issues the same challenge to the world.

It's hard for us, isn't it? Because, you know, we've heard these words so many times. But here is Jesus taking onto his own lips the words of God, the Creator, and saying, not that you'll be his witnesses, but you'll be my witnesses.

He is proclaiming that the turning point of the world is him. That the great and pressing and most vital issue in the world today is not whether the United Nations can bring peace.

It's not whether we can drive back poverty and conquer disease and famine, even though these things are very important. But ultimately, the issue that the world turns on according to Jesus is that every man and woman and boy and girl come to see who he is and come to receive the salvation that is in him.

[10 : 32] You shall be my witnesses, he says. And this verse, this chapter 1, verse 8, is like a table of contents for the spread of the gospel through the rest of the book of Acts.

First seven chapters in Jerusalem, the next few chapters in Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth by the end of the book. And each time the gospel moves over these pivotal boundaries, it's not because of the church's brilliance.

It's because God is driving the church out. In fact, one of the lovely things that we will see increasingly as we go through the book of Acts is that the main problem to the gospel is not opposition from the outside or unbelief or people who don't know Christ.

The main problem for the spread of the gospel is those who are his witnesses. It becomes very understandable. I mean, God draws us to himself and we begin to experience the delight of his forgiveness and his salvation and God calls us into a lovely and pleasant community with those who are forgiven of their sins and we become comfortable and we become content.

And sometimes the only way that God is able to push his purposes forward is by breaking the church out of its comfort zone. Do you notice that's what happened? That's how God got the gospel out of Jerusalem and to Judea in chapter 8.

[11 : 51] Turn over and have a look at that for a moment. Chapter 8, verse 1. The second half of the verse, On that day a great persecution arose.

This is after the death of Stephen. against the church in Jerusalem and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria except the apostles. The apostles stayed in Jerusalem in verse 4.

Those who were scattered went about preaching the word, evangelizing the word. That's how the gospel got to Judea and Samaria. It wasn't that the church sat down in Jerusalem and said, you know, let's do a mission to Judea.

They haven't heard the gospel yet. At every stage it's God who takes the initiative and very often it is at great inconvenience to the church because witness is the purpose of God.

That's my first point and it's Luke's first point and the second is that if witness is the purpose of God, witness ought to be the purpose of the church because if the church is the place where God is present and if God's purpose is to spread the gospel then it ought to be the purpose of the church.

[13 : 08] Let me put it to you differently. You remember at the beginning of the book of Acts we're told that Jesus' ministry has two phases. First phase was his earthly ministry, what he began to do and teach.

Now we move into a second phase where he is in heaven, what he continues to do and teach and in the first phase of his ministry during the time of the gospel what was his purpose?

Do you remember in Luke 17 Jesus says I have come to seek and to save the lost. Do you think from heaven Jesus' ministry will be any different?

No. And if the church is that body of people that is gathered around the person of Jesus Christ and if Jesus is continuing his ministry through the church then the church that is faithful to Jesus Christ will be full of people that are concerned to seek and to save the lost.

That means that you and I brothers and sisters will be people who think about our friends and think about our family who don't know Jesus Christ as though they are lost without him.

[14:16] That's why the book of Acts and the whole of scriptures is so unashamed about this idea of salvation where we started at the end of Acts chapter 2 that the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved saved from death through Jesus Christ saved from sin saved from being eternally lost and it is those people who the Lord adds into the church you see you cannot be saved without being added into the church and you can't be added into the church without being saved saved and we don't add one another it's Jesus who does this work the community of the church is the centre and focus of God's saving activity in the world very interesting we will see this as we move through Acts but time and time again as the apostles are preaching the good news of Jesus Christ they will stop in the middle of the sermon and they will quote a verse from the Old Testament saying what I am doing right now fulfills

God's purposes it's wonderful stuff well if witness is God's purpose for the church how do we apply this and I just want to make two applications really first personally and then to us as a body it's a wonderful thing that you can't explain the spread of Christianity through the work of the apostles or the professional preachers it's the work of the nameless amateur Christian missionaries who witness to their faith but before you turn off entirely I need to say that being a witness does not make you an obnoxious television evangelist someone who's insensitive to your friends and unloving there is a key difference between being a preacher and being a witness and I want to try and show you this from Colossians would you turn right this is our last cross reference

Colossians chapter 4 verse 2 there are two oughts in this passage the apostle says continue steadfastly in prayer being watchful in it with thanksgiving pray for us also that God may open to us a door for the word to declare the mystery of Christ on account of which I am in prison that I may make it clear as I ought to speak and then he says conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders making the most of the time let your speech always be gracious seasoned with salt so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone so the apostle ought to speak and the Colossian congregation ought to answer in other words the apostle distinguishes between those who have a public ministry of preaching and teaching and speaking and the majority of

Christians certainly in Colossae who speak about their faith when they are asked not all of us are called to preach all of us must represent Christ but there's an expectation here that our lives and our conversation will be such that we will be asked questions he says let your conversation be salty let it be different with an edge of truth on it so that people will ask you why you say those things and why you are like that and in verse 2 he says to the Colossians pray specifically for concrete opportunity for the gospel this is a natural thing to happen to us when we come to faith in Jesus Christ that we pray for opportunities to speak and we pray for those whom we love that they may be saved and my experience is that when I pray for opportunities God gives me opportunities and then when I'm not praying for opportunities I miss opportunities and I want to urge each of us to do these things privately that is to pray for one or two people who

God lays on your heart and to prepare yourself so that you might know how to answer and if someone asks you a question you don't know how to answer say I'd like to talk to you about that another time so that's so that's the individual application let me just apply this quickly to us as a community we as a community like every church community exist for a greater purpose than ourselves God has given us as a light and if we lose sight of this outward direction as a community at St.

[19 : 15] John's and become focused merely on ourselves and our own needs we will not fulfill God's purposes for us here in Vancouver if you're new to St.

John's you probably know that we try and structure our calendar year around a number of events that might act as windows for those who are seeking or for those who you may invite to come and several times a year we encourage you to invite people to come and after we have these events we have a course called Discovering Christ and it's a superb course which just opens the door on the basics of the Christian faith there's actually I think there are three Discovering Christs now they're slightly different from each other and they run all through the year and we encourage you to bring friends to these over the last couple of years we've had on average a hundred people go through DC each year many of them have come to faith in Christ and are now part of the community there are people here this morning who've become Christians through that ministry and I think we should be eternally grateful for it however when I look at the New Testament the normal way that people come to faith in Jesus

Christ is not through a program or through the institution of the church it is through the network of friends and families of those who belong to Jesus Christ and I think that's probably true for 90% of us here this morning to be devoted to witness means that we need to be engaged in more than one style of outreach as a congregation it's interesting to me how few ministries we're going to be honouring today in this area I wonder whether this is a low priority for us I want to encourage us to think creatively about this as a church God has placed each of us in a network of friends and acquaintances you're God's person in that place no one else has been put in that place like you have and it may be that God has you there for a particular purpose and it's a wonderful thing to begin to treasure our networks and to think of them as places where God can be involved where God can work as we come to our vestry meeting next month I think it's high time that we begin praying for and planning towards planting a new church this is very trendy logo language today but I think there's a biblical precedent for it church planting is where a church takes a group of its members and seeks to form a new church and it's a great way for that church to share its resources and become a river instead of a swamp I often on

Sunday mornings look out and think I'd like to take this group of people over here or over here or the last eight rows and begin a new congregation somewhere and I wonder whether there are people here who would begin praying about whether they should be part of a new work a new congregation in a new place we move through the book of Acts we find this is what happens in fact it's a little more directive what the churches do is they find their best people and send them out to plant another church and it turns out to be very good for the sending church and it creates a whole new community of grace in a different place and I also need to say that we must not be content to just think about Vancouver for God has commissioned us to the ends of the earth and the gospel expands outwards that's how Christianity came to Canada as a community we support a number of individuals and ministries that are working to spread the love of God and the gospel of Christ in other parts of the world one example is the work of the Ratanak project in Cambodia and one of the projects that

Ratanak is involved with right now is rescuing children from brothels in Cambodia we support orphanages but what happens to those children when they're old enough to move out of the orphanages this is one of the issues that we've found and tomorrow night I think on now TV there's a dateline that's going to be aired from eight o'clock or nine o'clock I'm not sure of the exact hour on the work of a project in Cambodia it's not easy watching but I encourage us to see it to pray about it last week I mentioned to you the courage of our African brothers and sisters who are standing up for us and suffering for it and I don't know whether I mentioned this or not but when Archbishop Malango chose to stand up for us and come and visit with us in September 2002 the American diocese that support the work in Central Africa cut them off financially so the

[24 : 28] Archbishop of Central Africa and all the clergy of Malawi have not been paid a regular salary since Easter of last year and there may come a time when our commitment to the gospel will require a more radical generosity across boundaries we haven't seen last year in the States I visited with a church that's a little larger than ours and they've made the decision that for every dollar they spend on themselves they'll spend a dollar on the work of mission that's a raising of the bar isn't it well the enemy of God is still at work and he is still seeking to deflect us and distract us and discourage us and derail us from fulfilling God's purposes for us in this world and I think we need to examine ourselves individually and as a community here at St John's to see if we are earnestly seeking to love Christ and to love Christ's people and to love Christ's world are we a learning church and a loving church and a missionary church and I think if we do these things we the Holy Spirit himself will be part of what what we are doing and we will be a community that not just receives salvation but sees salvation at work in the lives of others so let's bow our heads and we will pray that God would help us in this our heavenly father we thank you for your kindness to us calling us to know you through the Lord Jesus Christ and calling us into the privilege of serving him and it is a fearful thing for us father that you have given us as a light into this world and in ourselves we feel very inadequate and so we pray that you would forgive us our sins and cleanse us and fill us with your spirit that we may be those who are devoted to your word devoted to the fellowship and devoted to your witness so that your purposes here may go forward and that you would receive all the honor and glory and majesty and power and dominion that is yours in

Christ's name we pray amen