

Psalm 8

“Our Witness, Received and Given” July 11, 2021

John 1: 1-5, 14

To witness means to see an event take place; to have knowledge of (an event or change) from personal observation of experience. It also means to testify to, or to give evidence of; and, it means to openly profess one’s religious faith.

When we think about our beliefs and values, our faith in God and Christ, our commitment to church, do we think about ways we can testify to these beliefs, values, faith and commitment? As David Fuller said, and was often quoted by Rev. Billy Graham, “if we were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?”.

But rather than thinking about if we would be convicted, I’d like us to focus on ways we can testify, or witness to our knowledge, experience, and evidence of God, Christ and the Holy Spirit in our lives. I am encouraging us to find ways to witness to what we have received. This is what God and Christ ask us to do in the Gospels, and in fact, from the very beginning of our creation. The whole earth and all its creatures are created with the ability to witness to God’s glory – and that includes us. How do we do so? And to what do we witness?

Swedish poet Carl Boberg was moved to write a beautiful poem about God’s greatness in 1885. Boberg’s son said that Psalm 8 was part of the inspiration for the poem, as well as the beauty of nature Boberg observed at the time of a brief thunderstorm. The first English translation of the poem was published in the US in 1925, as “O Mighty God.” The first two verses of our present hymn come from that Swedish hymn, translated into Russian, which British Missionary Stuart Hine heard in Ukraine. He translated the Russian into English, then added more verses as he was inspired. The 3<sup>rd</sup> verse he wrote, based on the witness of faith given by Ukrainian Christians to him while ministering there before World War II. The 4<sup>th</sup> verse comes from the witness given by Russian and Polish exiles to Hine. He was now home in England after World War II, and ministering to these exiles held in a camp there. Hine’s hymn was published in 1949 in a gospel magazine, and was used by British missionaries; it rapidly became popular throughout the world. Naga natives of Burma living in India were heard singing the hymn with beautiful

harmonies, by a composer from Fuller Seminary, who got that version published in California in the early 1950s. Another music publisher was given a song sheet of that California version of the hymn, and he got permission from Hine to publish his own version which Billy Graham then used during his crusades in the mid-1950s and 1960s. Billy Graham is said to have liked the hymn particularly “because,” he said, “It is a God-honoring song, which turns our eyes toward God rather than ourselves.”

What a line of witnesses inspired by and affected by that poem! It was written in 1885, then set to music, then translated so many times, was propagated around the world through missionaries, then got new verses, and was set to new music...and in 1974 it was named the most popular hymn in America! The group of church musicians Page CXVI chose “How Great Thou Art” to be part of their project to make hymns accessible and known again, because they felt it is one of the richest, most meaningful and moving pieces of music written.

What line of witnesses are we part of? What are we willing to testify about, or give our evidence of? So many of us tell about books we read, movies we see, restaurants we try.... But when it comes to our values and beliefs, our commitment to Christ and church, what are we saying or doing, to give evidence of our faith and commitment? How are we building on the testimony of our parents and grandparents, our teachers, pastors, coaches, mentors? What values and beliefs do we find compelling enough to share with others, through word, drama, music, art, even financial support? How does our lifestyle, our home environment, testify to those values and the faith in which we believe?

Both Psalm 8 and the prologue in the Gospel of John, chapter 1, give a similar witness and praise. Psalm 8 proclaims, “Lord our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth,” both to open and close the psalm. The psalm speaks of God’s glory set above the heavens, in the moon and stars, and coming out of the mouths of babes and infants! And then, God’s glory also crowns humans and gives them dominion over the works of God’s hands...animals, birds and fish... How majestic is God’s name! When we look at the Psalm more closely with the scholars, it is clear that human care of the earth is framed within God’s plan and care. God invites us into this partnership with God to honor and care for creation,

and God's love and creativity are clearly the framework and bookends within which we should operate.

Do we witness, observe and experience the glory of God in these ways? In the amazing beauty of the heavens, the created world, in infants, and in humans even, as they care for God's world...what could be our testimony about these things? What might we say to others about the wonders and glory of God that we observe in the world through our daily experiences? When I was growing up in Joliet, our dining table was in front of sliding glass doors that looked west over a farm field, and each night at supper we would marvel at the beauty of the sunsets. As young parents, Rodney and I used to take our boys out in the evening to watch the moon in the evening. Camping at state and national parks is something we grew up loving, and have passed on to our boys. How about you?

The Gospel of John also witnesses to the creation story, telling the story of Jesus in a way that points to the new things God is doing through Jesus, the new creation begun through Christ, who was part of the first creation of Light and Life as God's Word. Through Jesus' love and ministry, humankind is made new, as we observe and testify to God at work in Jesus. Jesus is the Life and Light of God that comes to dwell among us, made flesh, whose glory dispels the darkness around us. The first verses of chapter 1 in John, remind us not only of God's work of creation, but also of God's presence with the Hebrew people, dwelling among them in the tent of meeting, leading them by his glory shining in the pillar of cloud by day, the pillar of fire by night, shining from Moses' face after he met with God. In the Gospel of John, those who encounter Jesus, encounter God's light, life, and glory: God dwelled among them in Jesus, and they saw his glory. They give witness to that evidence observed, through **their** words and deeds – the woman at the well, the man born blind, Martha & Mary. How do we speak and give evidence of the God we see revealed in Jesus, still dwelling among us, and revealing God's glory?!

The first two verses of How Great Thou Art speak to how we encounter God's glory in nature. The last two verses of How Great Thou Art speak to how we encounter God's glory in Jesus, and the Life and Light he gives to us as God's Word become flesh. What might we speak and sing about, to witness to God's glory and presence in our lives? Our ASP teams return this week, and will have

stories to tell of their encounters with God's love become flesh, whom they met in the sacrificial love we shared with families we worked with, in the loving support shared among teammates and with our ASP staff. They can tell stories of forgiveness and do-overs, stories of new beginnings, stories of God's glory in creation – in mountain beauty and children's innocence and joy.

Page CXVI rewrote the chorus lyrics of How Great Thou Art, to be sung like this: "Then sings my soul, to my Savior God, To thee we sing, How great thou art!" How will our words, our work, our art, our efforts, our giving, tell the world How Great God is, how God's love transforms our lives, and is present still, transforming our world? How will we give our witness, to the evidence we have observed and received? As Choir Director Mike Popplewell sang, and Music Director Scott produced it for our online worship and Facebook page, "Take this broken life I bring, make it a beautiful offering...Your love changes everything, make me a beautiful offering." Let us, share the Good News, the witness we have received, giving our witness to others, in our words and by our deeds! May our souls sing loudly and beautifully, for others to hear and see and believe in our great God, Christ and Holy Spirit! Amen!

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