
We Beg to Differ!

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Advent 3 – Year B

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. John 1:6-8

What does it mean to be a witness, to testify to the light?

Since the earliest days of Christianity, speaking about faith has been called bearing witness or giving testimony.

We don't hear these words now in the way that they were used then.

When we hear someone say now that they are bearing witness or giving testimony, we assume that they are telling their story. We assume that they are talking about something very personal, how they came to their faith. We assume that it is their story, their truth.

And, unless we are on retreat, we assume that, whoever they are, they are not Episcopalians!

There is nothing wrong with this – as far as it goes.

But, bearing witness and giving testimony are not really about just telling *our* story. They are about telling *the* story. They are not just about telling *our* truth. They are about telling *the* truth.

These words – witness and testimony – have their etymological roots in the law. They were the way judges discovered the facts. They were the basis on which decisions were made.

The prophet Isaiah claims that witness and testimony are also necessary for the salvation of the world. The prophet claims that God has called his people to tell his story. God has called his people to serve as witnesses, to testify to the truth that they have seen in the servant whom God has chosen. (Isaiah 43:8-13)

God's story is the story about the presence of a loving and just God, who is active in the world and knows us.

Witnessing to this story, though, is not for the faint of heart.

A friend of mine told me that her six-year old son woke up one morning last week with a swollen lip. He had fallen on the playground the day before. His question? "Mom, why does God want me to have a fat lip? Is it for his entertainment?"

There is nothing quite like being called to the witness stand before breakfast!

And, telling God's story does not get any easier after breakfast.

We really do seem to be living in an age of anxiety. You can see it on the front pages of our newspapers, magazines, and websites.

It feels like we have fallen into a downward spiral of accusations. Some, like the Rolling Stone accusations against a fraternity in Charlottesville, appear to have simply been fabricated. Others, like many of the accusations around the events in Ferguson, Missouri, seem to be wrong on the facts, even if there are right in the general sense that something is wrong. I don't even know what to say about the State of Georgia condemning an intellectually disabled man without even giving him the benefit of competent counsel.

The more anxiety we feel, the more reactive we become, and the more likely we are to lose our nerve, forget our purpose, and look for the quick fix. Eventually, it always seems to lead to a frantic search for someone to blame and the false promise that if we could just find and get rid of the villain, then everything would work itself out.

Witnessing to the truth, though, requires more leadership than that.

Take the example of John the Baptist. He too lived in an anxious time, yet he managed to make a powerful witness. It's not just what he said, interestingly. It's also how he said it.

The first thing that strikes me about the account of John in the Fourth Gospel is that it's really not about John. It's about Jesus.

John doesn't authorize Jesus, or empower Jesus, or even explain Jesus. He simply sees the Spirit descending from heaven in the form of a dove and remaining on Jesus. He hears the voice telling him that Jesus is the one. And, then he tells others what he has seen.

The truth, it seems, is not an abstract idea, fixed in time regardless of context. The truth is a person, a dynamic, creative, healing presence always there and always working in changing contexts.

And, for John, trusting in the redemptive activity of the truth was its own calling.

John knew that his story was the way that he went about telling the story. His truth was the fidelity with which he told the truth about God.

I am not the Messiah, he says. I am not Elijah. I am not the prophet. I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, a witness. I am the one called to testify to the light, the servant whom God has chosen, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

The second thing that strikes me about John is that he doesn't fully understand what's about to happen.

Although you have to go to Matthew and Luke to find it, John sends his disciples to Jesus with the same question that so many of us find ourselves asking so often,

"Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answers John's disciples as he continues to answer us,

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them." (Matthew 11:2-5; Luke 7:18-22)

Witnessing to the truth, telling God's story, requires leadership. It's not just about what you say. It's also about how you say it, how it is that you go about creating space for the redemptive activity of Jesus. It's more of a liturgy than it is a theory.

Let me give you another example. This one also taken from a place that many of us consider sacred, where we look for some part of our identity – college basketball!

For years, the students of Duke University have had the reputation of being the wittiest, most-outlandish, and best-organized college basketball fans in the country. The Duke team plays its home games in Cameron Indoor Stadium, so the students who attend games there are known as the Cameron crazies. It can be a difficult place for opposing teams to play.

There was a time when people experienced the Cameron crazies as less focused on cheering their own team, than they were in jeering other players, coaches, or even the referees. They would target someone and then pick on him for how he

looked, or what he wore, or how his name sounded. No one was immune, but the most memorable moments involved players who had gotten into trouble with the law.

Some of these stunts were very clever and, well, downright funny.

One opposing player had been arrested for marijuana use. When he stepped to the free-throw line, the students behind the basket all stood up and shouted, "Freeze! Police!"

Any player accused of theft could expect an outpouring of generosity when he got to Durham. The Crazies threw album covers to a player accused of stealing records, keys to a player accused of stealing a car and, my favorite, pizza boxes to a player accused of stealing pizzas.

But, sometimes the humor slipped from being clever to just being rude.

One player had been accused of sexual assault and, when he came to Duke, the students littered the court with unmentionables and other paraphernalia that they thought the player might need, and repeated crude chants during the game.

The *Washington Post* ran a detailed account of the incident, which prompted Terry Sanford, who was the president of Duke University at the time, to write an open letter to the student body.

It was a brilliant witness, worthy of John the Baptist.

The letter was only one page, headed with the title "Avuncular Letter" and signed "Uncle Terry." In it, Sanford challenges the students to make some changes in how they act at basketball games. "We can cheer and taunt with style; that should be the Duke trademark. Crudeness, profanity, and cheapness should not be our reputation – but it is. ... Think of something clever but clean, devastating but decent, mean but wholesome, witty and forceful but G-rated television, and try it at the next game."

By the time they got to the game against the despised North Carolina Tar Heels, the Cameron Crazies had seen the light. They wore halos on their heads made out of coat hangers and covered with aluminum foil. They presented Dean Smith, the legendary Tar Heel coach, with flowers and signs welcoming him to Durham. They politely requested that the Carolina players miss their free throws. They even held up signs saying "We Beg to Differ!" instead of yelling the usual obscenities when they disagreed with a referee's call.

The Avuncular Letter stands as a powerful example of what it means to be a witness, to testify to the light.

In writing the letter, Terry Sanford challenged the students, but never shamed them. He always says "we" in the letter, and never "you." He doesn't know exactly what will happen, but he trusts in the redemptive power of the truth. And, in creating this space for creativity and healing, he allows the students to change how they see things without losing any of the spirit that makes them who they are.

This is, I think, what it means to be a witness, to testify to the light. It's not about our truth. It's about the truth. And, it's not for the faint of heart.

Standing outside of the sweeping tide of anxiety takes courage. Holding steady when you don't know exactly what's going to happen takes stamina and a deep sense of purpose.

The purpose, of course, is to create space for redemptive change, change that can turn a crude challenge of a call into a clever card that says simply "We Beg to Differ!"