

“Listening to God, Witnessing about God”
Isaiah 6:1-8 & Romans 8:12-17
Rev. Jennifer Dunfee

Before becoming the director of NIH in 2009 Dr. Francis Collins was a famous scientist for being part of the team that mapped the human genome and then just last year in 2020 he received the Templeton Prize, a 1 million 100 thousand pound sterling prize for people who combine scientific achievement with exploration of the deepest questions of the universe and humanities place within it. He joined a distinguished list that included Mother Theresa, Billy Graham, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Dalai Lama, Bishop Desmond Tutu, and Jane Goodall.

<https://www.templetonprize.org/>

Dr. Collins received the award for his writing on science and Christian faith, especially how we know God through what God created: after mapping the genome Dr. Collins said in an interview: "It is humbling for me, and awe-inspiring to realize that we have caught the first glimpse of our own instruction book, previously known only to God."

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2006/07/21/july-21-2006-dr-francis-collins>

In 2006 Dr. Collins wrote a book “The Language of God, A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief” that describes how he merges having more scientific knowledge that pretty much every human on the planet and being, in his words, a very serious Christian.

He writes about growing up in an agnostic household and becoming an atheist in graduate school, but then a repeated experience with critically ill patients when he was a young medical doctor transformed him. He kept witnessing patients who in the midst of dire diagnoses held such faith in God’s steadfast love and goodness. He writes, “They had terrible diseases from which they were probably not going to escape, and yet instead of railing at God they seemed to lean on their faith as a source of great comfort and reassurance. That was interesting, puzzling and unsettling.” <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/voices/collins.html>

So he does some reading, visits the local Methodist church where the minister hands him C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*. These are all steps on his path, but none of this quite clicks for Collins until he has a moment of clarity of God’s presence, he describes a morning hike in the Pacific Cascades, where he came upon a large frozen three-stream waterfall, which struck him as an undeniable image of the Trinity. And then in his words, he, “knelt in the dewy grass as the sun rose and surrendered to Jesus Christ.” (from *Language of God* don’t have exact page.)

So on Trinity Sunday I ask, how many of you came to faith by stumbling across a three-part image in God’s creation, confirming for you that the Trinitarian God you had heard about was real and worthy of your life? Probably not many, but maybe not none.

But if I ask how many of you started on that path where God found you somehow, because of the witness of someone whose faith defied circumstance, whose belief radiated your way, whose commitment to Jesus unsettled you in a good way, probably a lot more of us.

Dr. Collins using the word “unsettling” to describe the witness of his patients makes sense, because God unsettles the predictable patterns of this world – forgiveness when nothing would merit it – hope where despair seemed the sure bet -life where death would make more sense, and when we have experienced any or all of those, we too bear witness to our Trinitarian God’s ongoing work in the world, as creator, redeemer, sustainer. Or as we considered in Bible Study, the way Karl Barth names it: Revealer, revealed and revealedness. (from my seminary notes, Google search suggests it is from Book 1 of Church Dogmatics.)

And according to Romans 8, we aren’t bearing witness alone. Verse 16 says, “it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,” that we are children of the God at work, and we are witnesses to God’s actions in the world. The word for witness and testify shows up lots of times in the Greek. The word here, **summartureó** – shows up only three times and it is a combination of the words “Witness” and “With” witnessing together, together as a people, together with the Spirit.

The Spirit – capital S, bears witness with our spirit, lower case, when we cry out – from Verse 15 raise our voices in power to witness that God is Abba creator. It is the same verb – cry out – that Jesus uses when he cries out to crowds “If you trust me, you are trusting not only me, but also God who sent me.” And “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.” And when he says even the stones will cry out in witness to him and when he cried out and gave up his Spirit as he died on the cross. That kind of crying out, for the most important kinds of things you will ever say.

The kind that the Hebrew Interlinear Bible uses to translate Isaiah 6, verse 3 where the seraphim cry out to each other, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” and the pivots on the threshold shook by the voice of him who cried out. Crying out as bearing witness, that can unsettle pivots on thresholds as much as the human heart. The heavenly beings, the Spirit of God, Jesus the son in life, death and new life, a patient in a hospital, a man on a hike surrendering to Jesus Christ, and you in whatever place God has unsettled your low expectations, your narrow limitations on God’s power. And this church, in its 175 history of crying out on this corner to witness to the power of God to transform lives, grow disciples, build Christian community, and serve our neighbors.

A scripture about bearing witness together seems particularly fitting for a weekend devoted to remembering. This past Thursday at Arlington National Cemetery was the day of the ceremony called “Flags In” where soldiers of the 3rd U.S. Infantry place small American flags at each of the 260,000 gravestones at the Cemetery. Each flag represents a story, and the soldiers of the 3rd US Infantry division give us a ritual for remembering. This Memorial Day weekend might be a time that your family has similar rituals, telling stories to make sure they are remembered. (Second Saturday Set!)

And we know from being followers of Jesus who commanded us to remember, there is no witness without memory. And witness draws from a memory that changes us, and obligates us to action from what we have seen. When President Eisenhower was Supreme Allied Commander, he wrote a letter to General George C. Marshall about his need, as the Allied forces were advancing up Germany, to visit the concentration camps himself. He wrote, “The things I

saw beggar description...The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty...were...overpowering...I made the visit deliberately in order to be in a position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to 'propaganda.'" <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1159986>

President Eisenhower demonstrates the role of a witness - to see something and then to say something about what you have seen, to move from observer to actor, to become aware and then to share it, to take something in and then allow it to move you to put something back out into the world. When America together witnessed the death of George Floyd on the video a year ago, we saw it and then we knew we were called to witness out with it in some way, to move from observer to actor, and to see how that witness obligates us, which we continue asking through our Matthew 25 initiative. How does our witness to God in our lives as creator, redeemer, sustainer, guide us in response to the things we have witnessed in our own lives, or in our country and world, that obligate us to action?

Right now in your life as it is this very morning, in our lives together as this church, we are witnesses, not in some future time when we personally have it more together, not in some future time when our building is completed and Covid is more firmly behind us. We don't wait to get our act together, because we are not called to be witnesses from our own efforts.

We are witnesses because we have seen, because there is a part of your story and our story together that God unsettled and is unsettling still. Like our building right now is unsettled, for the ways we will be called to witness, together with the Spirit capital S for 175 more years on this corner crying out together what we ourselves have seen: forgiveness when nothing would merit it – hope where despair seemed the sure bet - life where death would make more sense. The most important kinds of things we will ever say.

Let us pray: We give thanks for the Spirit that bears witness with us, and we ask for boldness and courage in crying out, especially any place where our faith in the good news of the Gospel, what we have seen, meets the needs of world. Amen.