
A Living Testimony

Psalm 119: 105 – 112

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 13, 2008 by the Revd M. Keith Daniel

In the church tradition in which I was raised, there was a point during Sunday morning worship (or the mid week service) for what we called, “testimony time.” This was the time where anybody (usually a church mother) could stand up in the midst of the congregation and share a testimony. Testimony time was “unscripted” personal expression of praise and thanksgiving for God’s mercy and grace. I say “unscripted” because without fail Aunt Ida or Mollie Mae or sister Shirley would stand up and testify,

I thank the Lord for my life, health and strength. I thank Him for waking me up this morning, and starting me on my way. He didn’t have to do it, but he did; helped me see another day. He put clothes on my back, shoes on my feet, and food on my table. He woke me up this morning clothed and in my right mind. I am glad to be here one more time in the house of the Lord. I almost didn’t make it this week. I was lying on my sick bed, and couldn’t get up. The devil been on my back, but by God’s grace and mercy I am here, and I am glad about it. My God is able, for he has delivered me before. I am a living witness that God is good all the time, and all the time my God is good. He brought me out of the miry clay and set my foot on a rock today. If it had not been for the Lord on my side where would I be? Church please pray my strength in the Lord as I strive to do His will.

There was always more detail, and sometimes you could see folk cringe or eye each other when Aunt Ida went on too long, was too repetitive or TMI (too much information). Some would question whether she was testifying or testi-lieing. But, folk revered testimony time as personal, public praise for God’s word and promise to deliver, heal, and perform miracles in the believer’s life. The church mothers used to say, “Baby, you have to go through a test in order to have a testimony.”

The author of Psalm 119 has certainly been through some tests, and found God to be honest, faithful, and just. This wisdom psalm is a testimony of all testimonies. The psalmist extols God as trustworthy and faithful. Like Aunt Ida’s testimony, 119 may come across as wearisome in its drama, boldness, and repetition. Yet, for those who have experienced God’s provision, promises, protection and preservation through the pain and pressures of life this great prayer and praise is worth rehearing and rehearsing.

Hear 119: 111, “Your testimonies are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.” The Hebrew word translated as *testimony* appears nine times in Psalm 119. Although some versions such as the NRSV render the word *decrees*, several versions translate the word *testimony*. The verb root means “to bear witness.” The psalmist has carefully studied the Torah, the five books of the Law, and witnessed how God delivered on all of his promises and guided the children of

Israel as a pillar of fire through the night. This psalm is a testament to God's eternal guiding light.

The psalmist is absolutely ecstatic about the testimonies of God, bearing witness to how God has born witness to God's own self through the Torah. In saying, "Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path (105)," the psalmist invites us into the awe and splendor of God's very first creative act. God said, "Let there be light and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness" (Gen 1:3-4).

Indeed, hindsight is 20:20. Through the gospels we encounter Jesus the true Light who gives light to all humanity. John testified or bore witness of Christ as the True Light. Jesus described John as a burning and shining lamp. Is your lamp trimmed and burning today? How have you experienced or witnessed the goodness and character of God in your own life or your neighbor's life this week, month, year? What have you perceived to be God's providential plan in the gift of life that is you? Why and how has the Lord preserved you through your trials, tests, and temptations?

Perhaps like many you're too overwhelmed or overcome by your diminishing health, the crumbling economy, the rise of natural disasters, domestic violence and war to appreciate God's light for the next step in your journey. But, through all these things we can not only have a testimony, we can *be* a testimony. God calls us to *be* living witnesses to the glory and beauty of the Creator and loving God who sent his Word and walked among us bearing witness to himself through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The psalmist sings, "The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple" (119: 130). "I rise before the dawning of the morning, and cry for help; I hope in your word." (119:148). We become living testimonies as babies grow and learn to walk. We crawl and cry to God for the bread of life. Like a mother carefully bathing her child, the Holy Spirit washes and whispers God's word over us, reminding us that God said we are His own. If only we would patiently receive and persistently ponder God's precepts and promises. Washing is meditation, memorization, confession and profession of our total dependence, receptivity, and submission to God's instruction and direction for righteousness.

To become a living testimony requires an increasing sense of the value God places on your life and an abiding awareness of how close we live on the edge of faith and fantasy, foolishness and finitude. The psalmist testifies to the fragility of life, in saying, "I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law" (111:119).

Next month I'll celebrate a major birthday. Let's just say I am doing everything that most men do when they reach my age. I'm trying to reclaim and prove my youth, vigor, and flair for adventure. I'm tempted to buy a Harley (for better gas mileage); for now I've settled for riding my bike to work, and riding roller coasters. Last month my family and I enjoyed a vacation in Williamsburg. A highlight was our time at Busch Gardens theme park. I was beyond excited as we approached the Lochness Monster roller coaster. There was this huge banner, "1978 - 2008, 30th year anniversary of the Lochness Monster." I looked down at my daughter and son (who was celebrating his 10th birthday) and said, "I rode this Monster the first year it opened, and I rode it 8 times in a row! I was 10 just like you." Well, let's say thirty years is a long time.

Unfortunately, that didn't occur to me until we were slowly inching up the first peak of the coaster. Suddenly, the lights came on in my mind, I was not a child anymore, not only was I 30 years older so was the coaster! But, what joy to witness my son call on the name of the Lord like he never had before (and so did I). As we stood in line for the Big Bad Wolf coaster, an older gentleman perhaps in his early 60's began making conversation with us. He shared how he had suffered ten heart attacks in his life. (I couldn't believe he was in line) He was also accompanied by his new bride (perhaps on their honeymoon?). His wife shared how she battled deep depression and had been confined to her bed for over a year under the pain and debilitation from fibromyalgia. My wife and I looked at each other and thought, wow what amazing testimonies.

A living testimony is reflected in the life of a person who experiences deep affliction (suffering), yet clings to the promises of God for dear life. I have heard or seen several testimonies this week. I listened to a colleague share how her autistic child is eligible to graduate from high school without special school instruction. She devotes three hours a night tutoring him after school. A friend, in his mid fifties, praised God for his new born child after his wife's four miscarriages in as many years. I was blessed to sit with a young couple clinging to faith in God as their infant undergoes chemotherapy in a battle against leukemia. My neighbor's wife passed joy onto us as she acknowledged God's favor in a just-in-the-nick-of-time diagnoses of her husband's heart trouble. And then there's our friend and single mother of three who lost her car and thousands of dollars to a crooked car dealer, but blesses the Lord for extra income and an unbelievable deal on a much better vehicle. The other day, I sat on the porch saying nothing but "Amen, sister" to a woman who used to live in our PathWays house during its darker days. She was rejoicing in being able to walk again after months in the hospital. She vows never to let go of God's loving hand.

True testimonies like these often go unheard and untold, because we're such busy people. We struggle to remain still long enough to listen for the Good News that is slowly but surely revealed to guide our footsteps, give activity to our limbs, renew our minds, and bring joy to our heart. It's important to discern the difference between a true testimony and a false one. A true testimony is a story in which God and God's word is the protagonist and the full center of attention. It doesn't say, "Look at me and my faith." It doesn't boast, "I've been through so much more than you." Although it is very personal, a true testimony exalts God and God's Word. A true testimony is joyful, humble, receptive, and grateful for the intercessory prayers of the saints. A true testimony rejoices like a child being tossed in the air by a loving father and shouts, "Do it again daddy, do it again." A true testimony is one you want to hear over and over.

In Romans 8, Paul speaks of what God has done in sending Jesus. Through Christ God fulfills God's own testimony. Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets; paving the way for all who believe in him. In that same chapter, Paul speaks of life in the Spirit saying, "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him." Furthermore, Paul writes, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose..." "If God is for us, who is against us?... Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will hardship, or

distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (8: 15b ff).

Today Marilyn, Carol and Willie will be commissioned as Stephen Ministers having been trained with other local laity from churches in Durham. Stephen ministers hear, see, and are called to *be* a testimony among those in need. Many of the people they are called to be with won't be able to get out of their beds each morning. Some will not be able to prepare a meal for themselves. Some will be depressed. Others will not be able to make it to church or read scripture on their own. But, a Stephen minister may offer care through all of these struggles. St. Stephen not only offered a riveting testimony, he was a living testimony. It cost him his life.

Isn't it interesting that as Stephen was being stoned to death he saw Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God? Perhaps the Son was standing up in glory to testify to the Father about the life of one of his faithful servants? I wonder who the Son is standing up for at the throne of glory this morning? I wonder who among us is willing to stand up for the Son and testify of His saving Light?

Selah.