

Faithful Witnesses

John 1:35-51

There are certain phrases that violently seize attention like few others. For instance, consider these things that church elders never want to hear from the youth minister ...

- No, I'm pretty sure there were just twelve when we left.
- "Flaming Marshmallows of Death" sounded fun at the time.
- I thought I had a firm hold of his ankles.
- And any sentence that begins with the phrase, "If the feds call ..."

Certain words have the power to interrupt everything else going at the moment, words like, "Fire!" In the world of the first-century Jews, there were such proclamations. A foreign empire ruled over the land through petty local officials. The priests were in political bed with Rome. The most dominant religious figures of the day, the Pharisees, had sucked all life and joy out of the worship of God through their tedious rules and regulations. But, at the sound of announcements like the ones in today's text, ears perked up, hearts were stirred and imaginations ran wild.

"Look, the Lamb of God!"

"We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote ...

"We have found the Messiah"

In just a few years after Jesus entrusted His mission to a handful of very ordinary men, His church exploded across the known world. This explosion occurred solely on the weight of the Gospel message and the life-giving Spirit. There were no church growth experts or marketing strategists. There was only a Gospel message in the hands of Jesus' empowered followers.

Three simple presentations of Jesus occurred before the church was founded and before the Holy Spirit was given to every believer. In fact, Jesus' earthly ministry was just getting underway. We have much more information to work with regarding the Person of Christ than did the characters in our text. Can these three ancients teach us anything about our own modern witness? Do they reveal to us anything about a power beyond ourselves or of some ability beyond our own capabilities that can encourage us when we feel inadequate to the task of leading others to Jesus?

Before us are three men with three unique occasions to introduce someone else to Jesus. The three scenarios are diverse enough that each of us should be able to identify with at least one of them. One man was a fulltime preacher. The other two were simply men with some other person in their lives who needed to meet Jesus. Surely, we can each see ourselves in one of them.

I. A Called Preacher (verses 35-39)

³⁵The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

³⁷When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. ³⁸Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"

They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

³⁹"Come," he replied, "and you will see."

So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.

A. John Proclaimed Jesus as One Who Can Remove Our Sins

The message of John the Baptist was one of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. He never said anything that could lead anyone to conclude that the coming *Messiah* cared about picking a fight with Rome. He would care about the sins of His people and how those sins disqualified them as citizens in Heaven's holy kingdom. He would care deeply about remedying this sin problem.

Earlier, in verse 29, John directed a crowd's attention to Jesus when he "saw" Him approaching. He said, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Here, only two of his disciples were present when John "saw" Jesus again. This text uses a different, more intense word that means John gazed intently at Jesus. He repeats, "Look, the Lamb of God!" This time, Jesus was not approaching John. He was "passing by." John was encouraging these disciples to leave him and to follow Jesus. "That's Who you have been waiting for. I came to prepare the way for Him. I have called you to repentance, but, I cannot remedy your sin. There's the Lamb Who can."

John's disciples wanted to go with Jesus. They had questions. Calling Him "Rabbi" was still a long way from confessing that He was *Messiah*, but they trusted John and hoped he was right. From midmorning into the evening, Andrew and most likely, either the Apostle John, who never identifies himself in his gospel, or Philip, the other evangelist to be featured in this chapter, picked Jesus' brain, steadily becoming more convinced that He was *Messiah*.

B. A Faithful Witness Must Deflect All Attention to Jesus

A certain preacher never prepared. Every Sunday morning he'd sit on the platform while the church was singing hymns desperately praying, "Lord, give me your message."

One Sunday, while desperately praying for God's message, he heard the Lord say, "Ralph, I have a message for you. You're lazy!"

The mystery of preaching demands careful preparation by a human mind balanced with a sense of utter dependency on the Holy Spirit. I can never predict a good sermon from a bad one based on how good I feel after the preparation or delivery. Typically, when I think I've nailed one, I get no feedback at all. When I am unsure about the development of thought or am distracted throughout the delivery, I may get feedback from someone who was enlightened or touched. Other preachers share similar observations. This is because while God commands that His Word be proclaimed, there is an inherent power to His Word that is utterly independent of the human mouthpiece.

John the Baptist appears in the opening verses of the gospel as one who "came as a witness to testify concerning that light..." (1:7) However, the author is very emphatic that John "himself was **not** the light" (1:8). John himself was also quite clear on this point. Of Jesus, he said:

"... He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me." – John 1:15

"... He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." – John 1:27

"... He must become greater; I must become less." – John 3:30

John never seemed confused about his ministry plan. His job was to point others to Jesus. Today, the professional ministry is constantly redefined in terms of what to do or how to lead. Peripheral issues can feed a man's pride and obscure his sole God-given task of pointing others to Jesus. It's treacherously easy to fall into the role of "professional pastor" rather than that of mere witness.

II. A Caring Brother (verses 40-42)

⁴⁰Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. ⁴¹The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). ⁴²And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

A. Andrew Is Known to Us Only as One Who Brought Others to Jesus

By the time John wrote, Peter was well-known throughout the Christian world. He had probably already died a martyr's death in Rome. But, the readers knew little, if anything, of Andrew except that he was Peter's brother. One writer from a century ago observes, "In Church history St. Peter is everything, and St. Andrew nothing: but would there have been an Apostle Peter but for Andrew?"

Once, after a crowd of 5000 had spent a day with Jesus, dinnertime rolled around. Jesus wanted to provide dinner for the whole bunch. Andrew was the disciple who brought a boy with two fishes and five loaves to Jesus (John 6:8, 9). Andrew, in concert with Philip, about whom we will read shortly, introduced an inquisitive group of Greek worshippers of God to Jesus (John 12:22).

B. A Faithful Witness Is Not Threatened when another Eclipses Him

Throughout his gospel, John refers to Simon or Peter as "Simon Peter." Jesus gave Simon the name Peter. He typically addressed the man as Simon, but these Gentile readers would only know Him as Peter. Quoting Jesus, John writes, "You will be called Cephas" which is the equivalent of Peter in Aramaic, the language Jesus actually spoke. The new name meant "rock". "Peter" or "Cephas" emphasizes strength and stability. That name did not always fit Simon well. He would have to grow into the name, Peter, and we are all witnesses to his growth process as well as a few stumbles along the way. Still, Peter ultimately became a key character in the early church at Jerusalem. Andrew, on the other hand, slips quietly into historical obscurity, seemingly content to go about his business of leading others to Jesus and moving off-stage. The important thing to Andrew was bringing them.

III. A Convinced Observer (verses 43-46)

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

⁴⁴Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

⁴⁶"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.

A. Philip May Have Been out of His Philosophical League with Nathanael

Philip was a loyal, albeit, unimaginative character. At the feeding of the 5000, Jesus tested Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip flunked. He had no sense of what Jesus might do. He should have said, "Okay, I'll bite. What do you have in mind this time?" Instead, he noted that eight months of wages could not feed this crowd. Philip believed that Jesus was *Messiah*, but he shared his news with Nathanael who was a more contemplative sort. Nathanael immediately had questions Philip was not prepared to answer. He questioned a role for Nazareth in God's plan.

Some speculate that Nathanael's crack about Nazareth may have suggested that the town had a bad reputation as a place of loose morals, but no archaeological findings bear this out. The emphasis should probably be on the term "anything good" rather than on poor little Nazareth. In other words, "Did not the prophets write about Bethlehem or Jerusalem? What is supposed to happen in Nazareth?" Even the Galileans, with whom Nathanael was numbered, believed that Nazareth along with all the other villages in Galilee were too mediocre to play important roles in God's plan. Philip's most powerful argument with Nathanael was the best one anyway: "Come and see."

B. A Faithful Witness Will Never Try to Argue Others into the Kingdom

I like Philip's answer. He couldn't "philosophize" with Nathanael. He reminds me that we are to bear witness to Jesus, not win debates. Sometimes, we talk too much. Instead, we should pray for God to prepare people's hearts and to prepare us for divine opportunities. Then, when it is time to speak, strive for child-like honesty rather than cleverness and creativity. Your best words will never transform anyone. Jesus will give you His words. Remember Paul's words to those who thought themselves enlightened and sophisticated: "I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom ... I resolved to know nothing ... except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:1, 2).

Conclusion (verses 47-51)

The common thread that unites each of these witnesses is that each relied on Jesus to seal the case rather than on his own eloquence. Somehow, we must learn what can only be called "a sense of kingdom balance." Our role in bringing others to Jesus is vital because God has declared it vital. Still, our roles are hollow if they are not partnered with and empowered by God's life-giving Spirit.

A certain Christian prayed every morning: "Lord, if you want me to witness to someone today, give me a sign."

One day, on a nearly empty bus, a big, burly man sat next to him. The timid believer anxiously waited for his stop so he could get off the bus, but before he could, the man began to weep. He cried with a loud voice, "I'm a lost sinner. Won't somebody tell me how to be saved?" He turned to this timid believer and pleaded, "Can you show me how to find the Lord?"

The believer immediately bowed his head and prayed, "Lord, is this a sign?"

It is hard to find that balance between relying solely on God and still realizing that He fully expects us to act. We don't know what Jesus said to the two disciples of John the Baptist, but John got them there, and Jesus convinced them. Andrew got Peter to Jesus. That was adequate. Philip persuaded Nathanael, "Come and see." In this case, we are given more insight into what transpired.

⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

⁴⁸"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

⁴⁹Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

⁵⁰Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." ⁵¹He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Israel was the name *YAHWEH* gave to the Old Testament patriarch Jacob before it became the name of His covenant nation. Jacob meant, “he grasps the heel” and proved to be an apt description of his deceitful and manipulative character. Jacob stole the family birthright and his father’s blessing by exploiting his impulsive and not-always-so-bright brother, Esau. It is unclear as to whether *Israel* means “Prince with God” or one who “struggles with God”, but the new name seems to have inspired Jacob to put that manipulative, grasping old nature behind him and to trust God. *YAHWEH* chose to reveal Himself to a man with an integrity issue. How much more might He make Himself known to one who loved truth?

“How do you know me?” is not “How do you *know* my identity?” but, rather, “How do you *know* what kind of a man I am?” Jesus tells Nathanael that He saw him under the fig tree. The large, shady fig tree was a popular place for study and meditation. Perhaps, some detail of what Nathanael had been reading about or thinking about under that fig tree was known to Jesus. He is quickly convinced that Jesus is the coming “King of Israel” and “the Son of God.”

Jesus assures Nathanael of much more to come. “... you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” This calls to mind Jacob’s dream in which he sees a stairway to heaven on which angels ascend and descend. The word “see” can mean mental vision. The Bible never tells us that the disciples ever witnessed a literal ascent and descent of angels between heaven and earth. But, a meditative sort like Nathanael would discern not only God’s angels at Jesus’ beckon call, but also that He Himself was the Stairway that brought heaven to earth. There was something about Jesus that resembled a Door, a Way, a Truth that leads to God.

When we are reluctant to share our faith, could it be that we are revealing our own distrust of Jesus to make His Own case through the power of the Word. This false humility is just the flipside of pride in that it presupposes that winning the lost is a matter of our own persuasiveness. We can point others to Jesus and trust Him to make Himself known if we will trust that the Holy Spirit is operative in us, through us and by the Word of God to awaken faith in others.

We must speak what we know, but how can we develop confidence that we are not on our own?

- 1) The Holy Spirit makes Jesus known in the Bible. We need to be serious about knowing God’s Word and relying on it more than we rely on ourselves.
- 2) The Holy Spirit makes Jesus evident in the lives of His people. We need to guard our lives and witness. Fake nothing. Walk in obedience. He will bring forth the fruit that others can see.
- 3) Prayer must drive all kingdom efforts. The modern church is captivated by modern methods and measures of success. We really do think that the key is human leadership and human effort. With that mindset, the most natural thing in the world is *NOT* to pray, for prayer presupposes dependency. Prayers of intercession and prayers for our personal needs come easily. Prayers for the advance of the kingdom are not so natural. Could this be because we realize our weakness in the realm of our needs, but that at our core we think building the kingdom is a human endeavor?

John was called. Andrew cared. Philip was convinced that Jesus was *Messiah*. There is a sense in which we should identify with all three of these early witnesses. Like John, we are called to be witnesses. We are to care as Andrew cared. And, like Nathanael, if we are convinced that Jesus is God’s answer to the human condition, we must at least invite others to “Come and see.”