

## Can I get a witness?

Thomas G. Long

**I**t was 4:00 a.m. on a Saturday, three weeks before Christmas, and I was leaning against the counter of a diner on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue in New York City. Always the early riser, I had roused myself out of my hotel bed and stumbled out into the December cold in search of a first strong cup of coffee. “Open 24 Hours” promised the neon sign glowing through the steamed-over window, and I pushed my way into the light and warmth.

The short, cheerful man behind the counter pulled the handle on the urn. “Do you wan’ some milk?” he asked, a soft sea wind off the Aegean wafting through his accent. I shook my head. “How

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’bout sugar?” Again, no. He put the coffee on the counter and deftly pressed a plastic lid into place. “So . . . what? . . . Do you wanna bag?”

“No, thanks. I’ll take it just like that.”

“OK, den . . . no milk, no sugar, no bag.” He waved his hands in the air as he spoke. “A buck eighty for you.”

I handed him a couple of dollars, and he pressed the buttons on the cash register. I turned and surveyed the dining room. It was way too early for tourists; the cast of late-night regulars was present. Over in the corner,

a young Puerto Rican couple leaned toward each other across a small table and talked earnestly, their pancakes and eggs barely touched. Beginning their day? Ending a long night? A homeless man in a stained army camouflage jacket sat by the window, staring into his coffee cup. A man in a rumpled suit, wearing black plastic-framed glasses, sat at the counter thumbing his way through a tabloid newspaper, a few crusts of French toast and a brown streak of syrup left on the plate he had pushed aside. The

door opened and an older woman with a creviced face and orchid-colored hair, wrapped in a frayed wool coat, walked in a bit unsteadily, a crimson lipstick oval smeared clumsily around her mouth. “Good morning, Costas!” she said cheerily to the man behind the counter. He nodded back at her. Suddenly she noticed me standing there. “Good morning, Dearie!” she said with a grin.

Costas wiped his hands on a towel and reached for a china coffee cup. “The usual, Gladys?” With an effort, she climbed onto a counter stool and settled on its cushioned seat, delighted to have accomplished this feat, clearly pleased to be known, to be welcomed into this familiar place. Costas placed the hot coffee in front of her, and she plucked a packet of sugar from a metal dish and began rhythmically tapping it on the counter. Outside in the morning darkness, an ambulance sped by, siren wailing. Over a speaker somewhere in the back of the diner, Tony Bennett crooned, “Have yourself a merry little Christmas. Let your heart be light. From now on, our troubles will be out of sight.”

I catch myself. I’m up to my old tricks. It is four o’clock in the morning, and yet, almost despite myself, I am thinking homiletically, thinking like a preacher. I cannot shake the habit. Like an off-duty detective, I can’t help noticing things—the camouflage jacket, the smear of lipstick, the troubled faces of the couple. And I am thinking about these things theologically, thinking about community and grace and spiritual hunger and salvation, and wondering if old Tony Bennett’s singing is a carol of sorts, his choirboy-trained tenor voice pressing the banal holiday ballad toward a soaring hymn.

### **Witness as a way of seeing**

To be a preacher is to be a witness. Witness is, of course, an ancient biblical symbol with powerful theological implications, but in a more down-to-earth sense, it is a habit of the eye, a way of seeing. Witnesses who have not seen anything are of little use in court, and if we are to preach as faithful witnesses, we must attend to the details of life happening around us. The least effective preaching, in my view, occurs when the preacher tries to rise above the grit of everyday existence, attempts to assume the voice of the pop philosopher or the broad culture critic, and pumps out expansive observations about great themes and

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overarching concepts, whether these be of the evangelical variety (“God’s Plan for Our Salvation”) or the more liberal sort (“The Call to Live for Peace and Justice”). The scripture does not speak this way, and neither should sermons. Indeed, if the Bible spoke in such gaseous tones, it would have been discarded long ago, but the biblical writers were witnesses who saw things—wind-blown chaff, fat grapes in vineyards, the sound God makes walking in the garden in the cool of the day, the soft cushion in the stern of the boat on which Jesus’ head rested as he slept through a storm.

In a remarkable passage in his legendary 1838 address to Harvard’s divinity students, Ralph Waldo Emerson complained about a preacher he had heard “who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more.” The problem was that the day Emerson heard him preach, a snowstorm was raging outside the church, and the bland and abstract preacher was no match for the visual excitement the congregation could see through the window behind him. “The snow storm was real,” said Emerson,

*the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought, and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches; his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all.”<sup>1</sup>*

“The true preacher,” Emerson concluded, “can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life—life passed through the fire of thought.”<sup>2</sup> To pass life through the fire of thought requires, of course, that life be witnessed, not observed from a detached mountaintop perch, but picked up, pebble by pebble, and turned in the light. Now Emerson’s point here is helpful and well-taken, but finally a few clicks off course. To think of preaching as a form of autobiography, of self-disclosure, is a communicational and theological cul-de-sac. The task of the preacher is not to deal out, as Emerson argued, his or her life, but instead to deal out the common life in which we all partake. In fact, attending carefully to the actual world “out there” instead of simply the sensate world “in here” is an act of faith in the creator God. Some forms of religious mysticism may seek to find God in the interior of the soul, thus rendering the outside world an illusion. But not so Christianity, which as a creational and incarnational faith insists that the deepest truths are not to be found “in here” but “out there.” “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it” (Ps. 24:1), and the best preaching is done by those who have cultivated a loving eye for seeing life that way. As a character in a Robinson Jeffers poem says, I “have fallen in love outward.”<sup>3</sup>

The novelist William Saroyan was once asked about his method of writing. “My answer,” he said, “is that I start with the trees and keep right on straight ahead.”<sup>4</sup> As does the preacher who is a witness. We start with the details and keep right on straight ahead. Where most people see only the commonplace and the banal, claimed Saroyan, the novelist (and the preacher, I would say) sees the exceptional and the unique. When one first looks at a tree, every leaf looks the same, repetitions of the same leafiness. But a closer look reveals that this is “not precisely so, so that noticing this repetitious imprecision leads to everything else, especially life.” According to Saroyan, starting with the small details of a single tree eventually leads to the depths of life:

*A writer writes, and if he begins by remembering a tree in the backyard, that is solely to permit him gradually to reach the piano in the parlor upon which rests the photograph of the kid brother killed in the war. And the writer, 9 or 10 years old at the time, can notice that his mother is*

*crying at the loss of the kid brother, who, if the truth is told, was nothing much more than any kid brother, a brat, a kind of continuous nuisance, and yet death had made him the darling of the family heart.*<sup>5</sup>

And so the preacher begins by tugging on a single thread, a small detail—a crust of French toast, say, or a frayed wool coat—and keeps pulling until the whole fabric of human life gathers.

### **Witness as giving testimony**

But it is not enough simply to say that a preacher is a keen observer of life. There is more to being a witness than mere powers of observation. Witness is not an artistic concept; it is at root a legal term. Novelists may write fine books exposing the depths of life, but witnesses have a more pragmatic function: they are summoned to court to give testimony. Something or someone is on trial, and the people desire and need to know the truth. They are not interested in the witness's autobiography, poetic skill, or personality, except as it bears on the truth. The words that pulpit witnesses employ may, like those of poets, playwrights, and essayists, be beautiful, but it is not beauty that is our measure; it is truth.

Is it true? Is it true that God is present? This, according to theologian Karl Barth, is the one urgent question that hangs in the

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air in worship. “On a Sunday morning, when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church,” writes Barth, “there is in the air an expectancy that something great, crucial and even momentous is about to happen.” The people, Barth contends, have left behind the everyday world, a world complex, rich in meaning, perhaps even full of pleasure, but a world ultimately unsatisfying. They have come to worship seeking to know this one thing: Is it true? “When people come to church,” Barth asked, is it not the

case that “they consciously or unconsciously leave behind them cherry tree, symphony, state, daily work, and other things, as possibilities somehow exhausted?”<sup>6</sup>

Yes, people leave behind the cherry tree, the symphony, and daily work to enter the court of worship in search of an answer to the question, is it true? But the answer to that question inevitably involves the cherry tree, the symphony, and daily work. People are not concerned to know if God is present in some abstract way.

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They want to know, is God present in life, in my life? The cherry tree and the symphony cannot give the answer to that question; only the gospel can answer that question. But the gospel's answer is yes: It is true. God is present! God is present in the sanctuary. God is present in the communion of the saints. And God is present in nature, and in the arts, and at the dinner table, and in the office cubicle—in cherry tree, symphony, and daily work.

That is why I have always found so compelling Jürgen Moltmann's image of preachers as those who "come from God's people, stand up in front of God's people and act in God's name."<sup>7</sup> The preacher comes from God's people, comes up from the congregation. The preacher is a member of the assembly, a part of the body of Christ, and the preacher shares their life. The preacher has been with them at the dinner table and in the hospital. The preacher has shared picnics beside the lake and wept with them at the funeral home. The preacher has been with them in the diner at 4:00 a.m. on a Saturday and seen their physical and spiritual hunger.

Because they have called the preacher to this task, because the community of faith urgently wants to know, is it true? the preacher has put on the spectacles of the biblical text and looked out at every aspect of their common life. And now the preacher is summoned in the great trial to give testimony in response to the question, is it true? So the preacher gets up from the community, takes the pulpit-shaped witness stand, and tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

### **Witness as martyr**

It seems to be such a gentle thing to walk into a diner at 4:00 in the morning and see it as a theater of the glory of God. But it is

not gentle. Many powers have a vested interest in keeping the diner just a diner and no more, in keeping its forlorn patrons social castoffs and nothing else. If people begin to think of their lives as arenas of the grace of God, they become less desperate, less vulnerable to exploitation. If people start to understand themselves as saints, they become less pliable as consumers and victims.

It is not for nothing that the New Testament word for witness is *martyr*. Most of us who preach will not be killed by the sword. More effective, less dramatic methods render us mute, laugh us to the margins, make us and our gospel irrelevant, kill us in the marketplace of public opinion.

But then there is always a Gladys, perching unsteadily on a counter stool somewhere and pulling around her what is left of her tattered coat, in a futile attempt to keep the winds of life away. The false witnesses have had their way with her, telling her that she's of little worth, defeating her with the news that death lurks down the dim alleyway of her future, waiting. Costas the counter man, the Puerto Rican couple, the guy thumbing the tabloid, the homeless man in the army jacket, the cook in the back, and indeed the whole world look toward Gladys and wonder if any other witnesses will testify in her trial. Is it true? Is it true that God is present for Gladys? It is our duty and delight to take the stand and tell the gospel truth that in our very midst is a daughter of the living God.

As William Stringfellow urged preachers,

*In the face of death, live humanly. In the middle of chaos, celebrate the Word. Amidst babel, I repeat, speak the truth. Confront the noise and verbiage and falsehood of death with the truth and potency and efficacy of the Word of God. Know the Word, teach the Word, nurture the Word, preach the Word, defend the Word, incarnate the Word, do the Word, live the Word. And more than that, in the Word of God, expose death and all death's works and wiles, rebuke lies, cast out demons, exorcise, cleanse the possessed, raise those who are dead in mind and conscience.<sup>8</sup>*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, Sunday Evening, July 15, 1838; <http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson Jeffers, *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, vol. 3, 1938–1962, ed. Tim Hunt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 178.

<sup>4</sup> William Saroyan, “Writers on Writing: Starting with a Tree and Getting to the Death of a Brother,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, “The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching,” in *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 691.

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 303.

<sup>8</sup> William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1979), 143.

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