

SERMON TITLE: "Acts of the Spirit: Witness of the Spirit"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:22-33
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 30, 2021 (Heritage/Memorial Day) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several days, I've been learning about the Tulsa Race Massacre that happened one hundred years ago this week. Do you know about this? Have you just now been learning about this, like me? On May 31 and June 1, 1921, white rioters looted and burned the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma. "Some historians say as many as 300 Black people were killed and another 10,000 were left homeless."¹ What previously had been a thriving and affluent black neighborhood never recovered from the devastation.

Obviously, there have been many questions about why and how such a thing could have ever happened. But, after an official Race Riot Commission was organized in 2001 and historical resources were examined, "the Race Riot Commission determined a number of details to be undeniable. 'These are not myths, not rumors, not speculations, not questioned,'" they said. "'They are the historical record.'"² According to the Tulsa Historical Society, a black man, a white woman, "and an unknown gunman were the sparks that ignited a long smoldering fire. Jim Crow [laws], jealousy, white supremacy, and land lust all played roles in leading up to the destruction and loss of life."²

By a miracle of longevity, there are actually some people still alive who survived that destruction of their community. On May 19, three such witnesses testified before a subcommittee of the United States Congress. One of them was Viola Fletcher, age 107. Viola was seven years old in 1921, and she told those lawmakers in Washington, D.C., what she experienced. "'I will never forget the violence of the white mob when we left our home,'" she said. "'I still see Black men being shot, Black bodies lying in the street. I still smell smoke and see fire. I still see Black businesses being burned. I still hear airplanes flying overhead. I hear the screams' . . . 'Our country may forget this history,' she said, 'but I cannot.'"¹

I'm telling you about this historical witness because our topic today is the "Witness of the Spirit." Beginning with Ascension Sunday and continuing on Pentecost Sunday, we have already talked twice about the expectation and coming of the Holy Spirit upon the early disciples in Acts 1 & 2. Today we continue this sermon series on the "Acts of the Spirit" by acknowledging the importance of evidence, testimony, and witness. As we focus on Acts 2:22-33, let's think about how we might participate in this witness of the Spirit.

1—WITNESS #1: GOD

After the wind, fire, and languages came upon the Christian believers at Pentecost, Peter stood up and addressed the Jews who were gathered there in Jerusalem. I invite you to picture Peter's speech to his fellow Israelites like an attorney making a case to a jury. In his effort to convince the Israelite jury about the importance of Jesus, the first witness Peter called to the stand was none other than God's own self. We see this in verse 22, where Peter pointed out that "Jesus of Nazareth [was] a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him."

By empowering Jesus to do amazing miracles like healing the blind, feeding the multitude, and walking on water, God had validated and witnessed to Jesus' importance. When the Jews failed to recognize and honor God at work in Jesus, they crucified and killed him. But, again, God worked a miracle in and through Jesus. As Peter said in verse 24, "God raised him up, having freed him from death." And, thus, Peter drew on God's reputation and credibility with the Jews to give evidence of Jesus' special status. Peter relied on God's witness to prove that Jesus was worthy of their respect, admiration, and worship.

2—WITNESS #2: DAVID

It's hard to imagine any jury that wouldn't be fully convinced by the evidence and testimony of our almighty, life-giving, creator God. But, since the Israelites were still holding out, Peter called a

second witness to the stand. Witness number two was David, their ancestor and king from 1000 years earlier. Certainly the testimony of this great monarch who had united the 12 tribes into one strong kingdom would be influential.

The evidence provided by David—what we read in Acts 2:24-35—was compiled from selected verses of Psalms 18, 16, 132, and 110. Today we know that the Psalms were composed over many years by different poets. But, long ago, it was believed that King David himself composed all the Psalms. So Peter called upon those words as David’s prophetic testimony. David’s hope and prayer was that God would not abandon the anointed king to death, but would raise him up to sit at God’s right hand. Peter noted that this dream was not achieved for David, but the witness of David was prophetically fulfilled for his descendant, the anointed king and Messiah Jesus.

3—WITNESS #3: THE HOLY SPIRIT

Like a skilled lawyer on a legal drama, Peter was building his case piece by piece, witness by witness. But the jury of his fellow Israelites was a tough crowd who required more evidence. So, in Acts 2:33, we see Peter call a third witness to the stand. While God had empowered the miracles of Jesus’ lifetime and his resurrection from the grave; and while King David, 1000 years earlier, had prophesied about what would occur with his descendant; it was the witness of the Holy Spirit that would clinch the argument and seal the deal.

If there was any way to confirm that Jesus was God’s special servant, messiah, and son, it was through the events of Pentecost. Earlier that very day, the Holy Spirit had come powerfully with wind, fire, and languages. At first, the Israelites there in Jerusalem thought Jesus’ disciples were drunk with new wine, but it wasn’t about intoxication at all. It was about the Holy Spirit’s power coming upon the believers in such a flamboyant and glorious way that others couldn’t help but notice and pay attention. Through the excitement of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was able to clear through the clutter of traditional Jewish assumptions and predispositions, so they could see the new truth God was revealing.

And how could those Israelites gathered in Jerusalem ignore what they had just witnessed? The Holy Spirit was right there among them, acting upon their senses. Those Jews who had come to Jerusalem for the Pentecost harvest festival had now felt, seen, and heard the witness of the Spirit. Without intending to, those Israelites from all around the Mediterranean had themselves become part of the evidence for Christ. No longer were they mere skeptics in the jury box. They now had become witnesses to the truth themselves. They too had become participants in the witness of the Spirit.

4—WITNESS #4: US?

Of course, all that begs the question: What does this trial by Pentecost fire have to do with us today? Some 2000 years later, can we still experience and participate in this witness of the Spirit?

As I was pondering this question the other day, I remembered a quote I'd heard before. The first time I heard this quote was in a youth Sunday School class, 40-some years ago. So, I have to say that, when I looked it up online, I was a little surprised to discover that the quote originally came not from a preacher, evangelist, or Christian author, but from an athlete and coach.

Let me first tell you about the man who said it; then I'll tell you what he said. I'm talking about John Wooden, who died in 2010. Before that, he was a basketball player and a much-awarded basketball coach. Under his coaching, the UCLA Bruins won 10 NCAA championships in 12 years. Wooden was revered because he was great with basketball, but people admired him for more than that. Wooden was also "a devout Christian," who considered his Christian beliefs to be more important than basketball. For him, basketball was "not the ultimate." He believed that "there is only one kind of life that truly wins, and that is the one that places faith in the hands of the Savior." Wooden faithfully attended church and read his Bible daily, and he hoped that "his faith was apparent to others." Now, here's the quote I want you to hear. Wooden said, "If I were ever prosecuted for my religion, I truly hope there would be enough evidence to convict me."³

In the context of my youth Sunday School class where I first heard that, the question the teacher posed to us teenagers was, “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to prosecute?” In other words, what would the witnesses say about you? Would they tell of your baptism? Would they tell of your church membership? Would they tell how you devoted your life to Jesus? Would they tell of your consistent worship attendance? Would the witnesses tell of your Bible reading, prayers, and participation in classes to stimulate and grow your faith? Would they tell of your ministry inside and outside of the church? Would they tell of your compassion toward the needy? Would they tell of your forgiving nature, generosity, and your love and respect for all people? Would the redemptive grace of Christ shine through? Would your attitudes, beliefs, words, and actions be a witness of the Spirit?

CONCLUSION

I began this sermon by telling you about the Tulsa Race Massacre. That kind of information may feel oppressive and painful. But when Peter addressed the Israelites in Acts 2, he didn’t sugarcoat his message either. In verse 23, he told them straight: “You crucified and killed” Jesus. But blame wasn’t where Peter ended the story. He also told them about God’s power to raise Jesus from the dead and about the Holy Spirit’s power to prove that it’s true. And then it was time for that Israelite jury to decide if they would believe and practice a faith that redeems people from sin and raises life from the dead. It’s time now for our decision too. May we each determine, Yes, I will believe and participate in this witness of the Spirit.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/19/998225207/survivors-of-1921-tulsa-race-massacre-share-eyewitness-accounts>

² <https://www.tulsaohistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/#flexible-content>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wooden, referencing John Wooden, Steve Jamison; *Wooden: A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections on and Off the Court*. McGraw-Hill (1997).