



## Witness in Memoriam

Psalm 1; John 17:6-19; Acts 1:1-8; 1 John 5:6-13

We like to hear stories. Storytelling has been one of the greatest human traditions extending as far back into time as we can imagine. Children the world over gather to hear parents and grandparents tell stories. They especially like to stories of themselves and their parents at a younger age. As adults, we like stories, as well. The Hollywood industry is, after all, simply a new venue for storytelling.

When memories fade with the passing of a generation, we revert to those storytellers who remind of us times past that are yet significant in application to our present and future. *Schindler's List* was published as one collection of stories of some of the millions of Jews killed in the Nazi Holocaust during World War II. The book was written as a reminder of what can happen when people are ignored and stepped on by others with power and a sense of moral superiority. It reminds us that greed for wealth or power is a great enough motivator to wield fear and force to subjugate a people and treat them worse than animals. It is a story which reminds us of yesteryear's tragedies in the hopes that we can avoid committing the same mistakes again and again.

Unfortunately, memories fade. Times change. We find ourselves removed from realities of the past—so far removed we may have no memories left of things gone by. The memories which linger may be woefully distorted. Perhaps we cling to nostalgic versions of a past we remember only in vague terms. Such memories are often selective. We highlight glories of the past and downplay its anguish, pain, and turmoil. We tell our stories, yet only some of them, and only certain aspects of those. As the years go by, we may rear a new generation that can go as far as to deny verifiable events of the past, as we have seen with a Roman Catholic priest recently denying the Holocaust.

To be sure, there are many stories clamoring for our attention. They sound conflicting calls to remember what may even be a fake history—history as we might wish it to have been in order to further our aims and objectives. The past is, after all, not entirely suitable as a basis for certain emphases we may choose to adopt.

And so, we tell stories. We seek perspective, information, and the knowledge that at least some aspect of the problems we face resembles issues dealt with by past generations. We recall their lives, actions, and experiences in dealing with the crises of yesteryear. We rehearse them to help us make sense of our own conflicts and uncertainties. We look back to our history, to our heroes, to those who have gone before to find answers for our own lives. In the process, do we remember to look to God and the witness of Scripture to Jesus' dealings with the difficult issues of living?

The psalmist reminds us that it is in reflection upon God's instructions that we are to find the counsel and direction we need. It is here we will gain a solid footing and foundation for our lives. It is here we are to find the answers that will sustain our lives and prepare us for the crises to come. It is here we find instruction and stories of faith and faithfulness which are to direct and support us through the difficult times we face.

Our nation is in the process of remembering stories this weekend. For some, it is simply an extra day off. For others, like those gathered last night at the D-Day Memorial in Bedford, it is a time to recall the sacrifices made by many who have given their lives in the service of this country and its

political commitments over the years. It is a time to reflect on the stories of lives who contributed to life as we have come to know it.

Yet as we memorialize the sacrifices made by so many in so many different war venues, we do well to memorialize an altogether other kind of story. We do well to pause to remember those who gave their time, energy, and very lives in order that we might understand the gospel of Jesus Christ that we proclaim.

We do well to consider Martin Luther's efforts to bring Christianity back to the Bible, including translating it into the language of his people. We would recall Gutenberg's printing press, used to place the Bible in the hands of the common laity for the first time in centuries. We do well to recall those like William Carey who gave his life and suffered the loss of his family to bring the gospel to India. We do well to recall early Baptists in Virginia who were imprisoned for the audacity to preach the gospel without the authorization of the state church. We ought to memorialize and tell the stories of Paul's imprisonment for the gospel, of Stephen's martyrdom, of John's exile in Patmos, of Philip's witness to the Ethiopian Eunuch, of Peter's crucifixion, and believers giving witness to Christ Jesus before Cesar's lions in the Roman Coliseum.

These were not sacrifices to maintain a way of life, a set of ideals, or the sovereignty of any political entity. They were the sacrifices of lives lived to share the good news of Christ Jesus and eternity with God.

The anniversary of D-Day approaches with June 6. We memorialize the Overlord campaign to take Allied forces onto the beaches of Normandy. We will recall so many lives shot down in that strategic battle to free the millions of Jews not yet killed in the Holocaust and rescue the world under military threat from Germany, Italy, and Japan. We remember with sincere gratitude what these did on our behalf. Yet our gratitude and memorializing of their actions on behalf of our political interests must take second place to our recognition of those giving their lives on behalf of our eternal interests and the purposes of God.

Jesus said that the world would hate believers, just as it hated Jesus, condemning him to death on the cross. Yet as John points out, the testimony of God is greater than all the condemnation and fear that has been arrayed against believers over the centuries. As we have fought battles against armed enemies on various fronts as a nation, so we are enmeshed in spiritual battles. It is not always easy to recognize those spiritual issues and realities as clearly as the political and physical ones.

After the resurrection, the disciples gathered, asking Jesus if it were time to re-established Israel as a sovereign nation—a question of politics and state. Jesus redirected their attention to the spiritual. It is time, rather, to focus on bearing witness to what God is doing. It is time to memorialize what God has done in Christ and through the Holy Spirit that the world might come to God. As John puts it, God has given us eternal life in Christ Jesus. Those who have Christ have life.

This should be the heart of our stories, should it not? Remembering how God was in Christ reconciling the world, yet present as well in our lives and the lives of others through the Holy Spirit. These are the stories we are compelled to tell. This is the focus we are challenged to pursue as we claim a day of remembering the sacrifice of lives on our behalf, that all might find true life in Christ Jesus.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*