

Seen and Heard
December 27, 2015

In less than a month we will celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. The month after that we will celebrate the birthday of George Washington. For neither one of these men do we have interesting or miraculous stories of their birth. Washington was born on the family farm. King was born in his aunt's house. So neither was born in a hospital. But that wasn't unusual for those days. We don't celebrate their births each year, but rather we celebrate what the grown men did for our country.

This week we have been celebrating the birth of Jesus. There are some very interesting and miraculous stories associated with His birth. But Jesus grew up and fulfilled the purposes for which He came to earth. The apostle John describes one of those purposes in the Bible, in John 3:32.

John 3:31-32 (NIV) The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard..."

Another way of saying it, is that Jesus testified. He witnessed. Today, we usually use the word witness to speak of someone who has come to a court of law to tell what they have seen and heard. Their testimony is evidence. Christians also use the word witness to mean the sharing of our personal experience with God. We tell people what we have seen and heard.

"Seen and heard" is a phrase that appears several times in the New Testament. We're going to look at those passages this morning. They begin in the Christmas story with the shepherds.

Luke 2:8-18 (NIV) And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

So the shepherds were told something by the angel. They were told about the birth of a savior, who is Messiah. They were given a sign to look for, a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. They went and looked and saw exactly what they had been told. They heard something special, from special messengers. Then they saw what they had been told they would find. The message was fulfilled.

That was pretty special, and so they eagerly shared with others what they had experienced. They witnessed, telling others what they had seen and heard.

The words witness, testify, announce, and proclaim are all words that describe what the shepherds were doing.

In Luke 7 a group of disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus, requesting a clear word about who he is. You see, John the Baptist expected Jesus to raise up an army and fight to get the Romans out of their country. When it appeared that Jesus wasn't going to do that, John began to doubt that Jesus was the Messiah. So he sent messengers to ask Jesus about this.

Luke 7:20-22 (NIV) When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard..."

They saw Jesus doing things that only God could do. Jesus tells them to go back to John and tell him what they had seen and heard. And they did.

In Acts 22 Paul is recounting his conversion story, and what a great story it is. He was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, when he was confronted by the Lord Jesus. We pick up the conversation between Jesus and Paul, as Paul recounts it, in Acts 22.

Acts 22:6-15 (NIV) "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' "Who are you, Lord?' I asked. "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. "What shall I do, Lord?' I asked. "'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me. "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him. "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard."

Paul is told to be a witness of what he has seen and heard. And that is exactly what he is doing in this passage, many years later. He is telling what he had seen and heard that led him to become a follower of Jesus. He has been witnessing to these things for many years to anyone who would listen.

We turn now to the book of 1 John. John is writing this as an old man, many years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. He begins his letter this way...

1 John 1:3 (NIV) We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us.

Followers of Jesus witness as they have opportunities to do so. Like the shepherds, we each have had personal contact with God. Part of a right response to that contact is to eagerly testify to others what we have seen and heard.

So what have you seen and heard? What is YOUR story? How did God work to bring you into a relationship with Jesus?

My own story begins with memories of my parents being my Sunday School teachers. I remember my mom playing the organ and my dad singing in the choir. I remember them leading us in devotionals around the kitchen table. I remember the different pastors of our church over the years. I remember a Christian camp where we were told to find a place to be alone, and with our Bible work through a written devotional. It was there that I prayed genuine prayers, not like the ritual prayers I repeated over and over.

I remember one worship service where God grabbed my heart... and knowing that I was a sinner in need of a Savior, I put my faith in Jesus that day.

I remember long talks with my friend as we struggled to understand what it means that Jesus is Lord of our lives. I remember God speaking to me one night of becoming a pastor for Him.

You have a story unique to your experience.

We also have each other's stories. Over the years we have seen God use many different ways of reaching people for His kingdom. Some of you can tell Kathy's story, or Sheila's story, or Allen's story. Recently we learned of Jean's story. As a part of our church family, those stories have become dear to us and we gladly share them too.

Remind yourself of the facts of your story. Never let yourself forget how God worked to attract you to Himself. Make the reliving of that memory a regular part of your prayer meetings with God. Give Him praise as you think back on how He worked to reach you with the Good News.

Seek God's help to tell others your story. In the book of Acts we see some of Jesus' apostles confronted by the Jewish leaders for witnessing about Jesus. The religious leaders command them to cease. But look at how the apostles answer.

Acts 4:19-20 (NIV) "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

Soon after this, when they were released, they rejoined the church family and prayed as follows...

Acts 4:29-30 (NIV) Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

Today, Emmanuel Baptist Church needs this kind of Jesus-follower. We need Christians who are eager to testify to what you have seen and heard. It may be that doing so will require you to step out of your comfort zone. It will mean pushing back the shyness, the hesitancy, the fear. So call on God for help, just as these first believers did.

"Give us boldness", they prayed. They had fears, sure. But they did not let their fear control them. Instead, they prayed to be bold witnesses for Jesus. "Give us boldness, fill us with courage," was their prayer.

Pray for God to do what only He can do. They knew this task was not theirs alone. God wasn't sending them off on their own to be witnesses. They knew God had a large part to play in preparing people to hear their stories. So they prayed for God to do what only God could do.

Acts 4:30 (NIV) Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

This witness thing is a partnership with God. But we are the weakest link. We are small and insignificant and powerless in the world. So pray for boldness and pray for God to lead the way.

They prayed that God would give them boldness. And as they went out to witness God indeed filled them with boldness. God did miracles to lead the way.

Would that be your Christmas prayer today, a prayer for boldness as you desire to share your story with Jesus, for Jesus, of what you have seen and heard?

Share your story of what God has done for you. The more you tell it, the more comfortable you will be doing so. This is a good time of year to do so, as people are remembering the events and experiences of 2015 and looking forward to the new year.

Ask others of the most significant events in their lives this year. Listen carefully. Then share your story of what you have seen and heard.