This is the fifth and last message on the “God of Wonders!” series of our Stewardship Campaign 2023.

These messages are based on one of the vows we make when we profess our faith and join a United Methodist Church committing to faithfully participate in its ministries through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.

The central claim of this series is that when we keep this vow by acting on our faith to uphold them, God makes wonderful things happen.

Today’s message is about being witnesses. What is a witness? A witness tells what they know and have seen. In a court of law, when we testify as a witness, we take a stand and tell the truth and nothing but the truth. In our faith, witnessing refers to practicing our faith in such a way that others notice Jesus in our lives. It is sharing the story of Jesus with others so they may learn and believe. In other words, we tell what we know and have seen about God by how we live and what we tell. When we do this, wonderful things happen, like people finding faith, hope, and courage when they thought there was nothing else for them in life.

There is a story in the Bible about a man who was a powerful witness of God. God used him to bless many people by showing them how to believe and act on faith. Through him, God made wonderful things happen. You can read all about his faith and courage in the book that has his name, Joshua. But perhaps one of his most powerful witness was in his old age. As he neared death, he had some parting words to say. This is what he said in the book of Joshua 24: 14-15,

“Now obey the Lord and worship him with integrity and loyalty. Put aside the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt, and worship the Lord. If you have no desire to worship the Lord, then choose today whom you will worship (serve), whether it be the gods whom your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. But I and my family will worship (serve) the Lord.”

These were the parting words of someone that knew his end was near. As such, they have so much significance. Over the years, I have learned that when a person is near the end of their life, their last words mean a lot. Oftentimes, they are simple words like “I love you,” “forgive me,” or “don’t do what I did, try and be happy.” Whatever it is, there is complete truth and honesty because there is nothing left to lose at this point. This gives people the freedom to say what is really and truly on their hearts. In fact, if a person is on their deathbed, their words are deemed so honest that they can even be used in a court of law as a dying declaration.

This is what Joshua is doing. Although he was not technically dying, he knew his end was near, so he was speaking a dying declaration. But who is Joshua and what do his parting words teach us about witnessing?

Joshua was born in Egypt prior to the great Exodus. He later became one of the 12 spies of Israel sent by Moses on a recon mission in the land of Canaan, which was the Promised Land. Along with Caleb, they were the only ones who believed God would lead them to victory.

Since he was a young man, Joshua was a brave person of faith and a trusted servant. As a result, Moses chose him to lead the people after him. So, after the death of Moses, Joshua successfully led the Israelite tribes in the conquest of the Promised Land. Joshua was faithful, brave, and trustworthy. As a result, people respected and listened to him.

Now, as he neared his death, he gathered all the tribes of Israel to challenge them to decide whom they would serve. He reminded them where they came from and of God’s faithfulness to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. Finally, he reminded them of everything God had done and challenged them, “Now obey the Lord and worship him with integrity and loyalty.”

This challenge was an invitation to choose between their old ways of worship and their idols or to serve the God who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt. So, he invited them, “choose today whom you will worship (serve).” In other words, take a stand and declare your faith—just as a witness would in a court of law.

Then, he showed them how to do it when he said, “My family and I will worship (serve) the Lord.” Joshua was testifying his faith, that he believed in the God of Abraham and that he and all his people would serve him forever. Whether others chose to believe as he did or not, he was doing what was right for his family. His witnessing was powerful, “You know me. You know the kind of person I am and how I have lived my life. This is what I am choosing. This is my faith. What say you?”

I do not think people were surprised by what Joshua said to them. What he said and did was the same thing. His faith and actions mirror each other. So when they heard him basically say, “This is what I believe, have done, and am going to do,” they listened to him because they knew he was a truthful witness and this is how they responded (24: 16-18, 22-24),

“Far be it from us to abandon the Lord so we can worship other gods! For the Lord our God took us and our fathers out of slavery in the land of Egypt and performed these awesome miracles before our very eyes. He continually protected us as we traveled and when we passed through nations. The Lord drove out from before us all the nations, including the Amorites who lived in the land. So we too will worship the Lord, for he is our God!”

Joshua said to the people, “Do you agree to be witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to worship the Lord?” They replied, “We are witnesses!” Joshua said, “Now put aside the foreign gods that are among you and submit to the Lord God of Israel.” The people said to Joshua, “We will worship the Lord our God and obey him.”

Joshua’s testimony was so powerful that he moved people to become witnesses too. His example led others to take a stand as well. A truthful witness has the power to move people’s hearts and change lives. A truthful witness encourages others to share their stories too. That is why the people promptly acknowledged God in their lives and chose the path of faith and service. Because of Joshua’s witness, they were moved to be witnesses like him. They had seen and experienced the wonderful ways God blessed them and provided for their needs; they just needed to be a little challenged to tell the story so others would believe too.

My friends, this is what we are called to do as Christians, to take a stand for our family and friends, to share our faith and values with them so they have a choice as we once did. You are here because some invited you and shared their faith with you. You have this power too. You can be a witness of faith, compassion, and goodness. You can bless many people by acting on your faith and making it visible. Just imagine how many people who know you (and perhaps even strangers), can be blessed by your faith. Don’t underestimate your story with Jesus. You have what it takes for God to make wonderful things happen through you.

Think of it this way: What do we know of God, and what have we experienced in our faith journey that we can witness to others? What have we learned from Jesus?

Jesus taught about loving God and our neighbor. He explained that love is practiced through compassion and mercy. Jesus taught us about forgiveness and grace; he revealed to us that God wants us and that we don’t have to prove ourselves worthy to be welcomed into God’s presence. Jesus taught us about praying not just for the people we care about but also for those against us; he showed us how to pray like that when we prayed while hanging from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.” Jesus taught us about seeking reconciliation by asking for forgiveness when we sin and forgiving those who sin against us. He urged us not to judge others and be hypocritical but to help each other live better lives. And ultimately, he told us that we could have eternal life through him if we put our trust and faith in him as our Lord and Savior.

Being a witness of Jesus means taking a stand in the world and testifying about what he did and said, about his love and power. Being a witness of Jesus means changing the world into a place where love, compassion, and forgiveness shape us as human beings. Being a witness of Jesus means stopping what’s unjust and evil, what’s rude and corrupting. Being a witness of Jesus means bringing kindness, compassion, love, hope, and peace to a world that frenetically tears itself apart.

You have this. I know you know this. Take a stand and be a witness. Keep learning from Jesus and serve him with faithfulness and passion. Put aside anything making you stumble and commit yourself to God with your family. This is the greatest gift you can give them—even more so as they are young and follow in your footsteps.

Here is the invitation and good news: Share your faith. Inspire others to believe. Encourage others with your testimony. Practice, teach, and tell your experience of God so others may believe too. The more you do this, and your faith will grow and be strengthened.

God is with you in the power of the Holy Spirit as Jesus promised, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

So don’t wait to be a witness until you are on a deathbed when all your youth and passion for life are gone. Serve today, pray, show up, give, and tell the story today. So the story of Jesus may stay with you and become the story of those you meet.