

A Sermon for DaySpring

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Bearing Witness

Deuteronomy 4

September 1, 2024

I'm convinced that church buildings usually say something about the communities who build them and are in turn shaped by them. If you pay attention, you can read their stories in the stone. Some of those stories bear witness to the good news of the gospel in ways that give hope for the world.

This one, for example...this building for example says, "Come Away," to wayfaring pilgrims on the roads of life.

This summer, as I visited some churches in Europe, and held our church and our community in my prayer, I kept returning to Margaret Vissar's picture of church buildings as memory-bearers, "A church is a recognition, in stone and wood and brick, of spiritual awakenings. It nods, to each individual person... it constitutes a collective memory of spiritual insights, of thousands of mystical moments. A church reminds us of what we have known. And it tells us that the possibility of the door swinging open again remains."

This morning I'd like to set before us the witness of three churches in the world. One is 800 years old. One church is 700 years old. One is 600 years old. They have been around a little longer than us. They tell three of the most extraordinary stories I know. Each church faced a moment of peril, like happens in history, and like happens in life. And each bears witness to the congregations who built the church and then were made by it when they were tested.

Bearing witness is another way of saying remember. Today's scriptures passages are about bearing witness by remembering how God has made you through deliverance, suffering, and renewal. Israel, standing on the banks of the Jordan, about to go into the promised land, is told they must remember what they have seen and experienced on the Exodus journey that has led them right to the threshold of a new life. *Remember* where you came from. Remember what God has done for you. Remember what God told you to do. Our reading in James cautions us not to be like those who forget—to look in a mirror and walk away, forgetting what we've seen. But to look deeply into God's life and God's word. The gospel reading is a cautionary tale of what happens when you remember the externals and you forget the heart. All of this is emphasized in Deuteronomy 4, as they're about to walk from this exodus journey, into their new life.

Deuteronomy 4: *Take care and watch yourselves closely. Do not forget the things that your eyes have seen nor let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.*

We're talking about sacred memory, bearing witness, remembering God's presence and intervention in our lives and in God's church. This summer in Italy, England, and Scotland on sabbatical, we visited churches that hold these kinds of memories and bear witness to them to generations to come. So today, three churches, three doors swinging open to the past and we pray, to the future.

I am not saying to you that you should use your device to look at churches that I am going to mention. But if you are person who can't stand not doing that, we put a QR code ¹ on the back, knowing that some of you can't stand it, we've given you this gift that leads to photos of churches I'm going to talk about.

Basilica San Francesco

San Francesco Basilica in Assisi, Italy is 800 years old. It is one of the world's great pilgrimage sites. Our DaySpring group concluded our pilgrimage journey right there in June there in a Sunday morning worship service. San Francesco was begun in 1228, soon after the death of its namesake, St. Francis of Assisi. Francis is buried in the lowest level in the crypt. The walls of the upper basilica are covered with the artist Giotto's frescoes depicting the life of Francis. It is a church that holds the memory of St. Francis. But there is more recent history. In World War II, the basilica was in peril. The Nazis had occupied Assisi and most of Italy. The Allies were marching up the Italian peninsula. Bombs were flying from both sides were flying. Assisi was in danger. To protect the city, an unlikely coalition of the German occupying commander, the Italian fascist mayor, the bishop of the church, local priests and nuns, and the Assisi people conspired to protect the city and its church. They succeeded. Secret messages went out one direction to Churchill and Roosevelt. Secret messages went out the other way up the German command. Negotiations continued. Prayers were lifted. It worked. Assisi was spared, and its iconic church survived.

Basilica San Francesco was preserved through the danger that could have destroyed it. This story remembers the heroism of the people and bears witness to the faithfulness of God through times of danger and trial. It is the psalmist's prayer, "Lord you have been our dwelling place in all generations..." "You preserve my life" (Psalm 90, Psalm 138). It bears witness today to those experiences when everything looks like doom, but then, amazingly, comes relief.

You think you're going to be fired, but the boss gives you another chance; you're sure you failed the test, but you squeak by. The house is on fire, but the smoke alarm goes off and everyone gets out safely. There's too much month at the end of the money, but an envelope appears, a kind gesture ensues, something breaks your way, and you stretch to make it. The doctor says, "We need to take a closer look at this." The biopsy comes clear. That's Assisi in WWII. As the hymn says, "safe and secure from all alarm."

¹ <https://www.ourdayspring.org/post/stories-of-three-churches>

San Francisco bears witness to the experience of being held in the strong protection of God that leads to the heart-felt praise, “God, you are good. Thanks be to God.” Let us also never forget nor take for granted the times in life when all looks hopeless, but the storm passes on by. Let us not let stories of divine provision slip from our minds all the days of our life. Let us say God is good. God is with us. Praise the Lord. Thanks be to God. That’s San Francisco, which is by God’s grace still with us today.

Coventry Cathedral

While that’s a story of protection, a 700-year-old church has a different story, and its congregation faced a different test. It is called St. Michael’s, or usually just called Coventry Cathedral. After its completion in the 14th century, it was one of the largest churches in England. Gorgeous stained glass. Magnificent soaring arches. Its spire dominated the horizon. Its story is *not* a story of protection and continuity through the trouble. Sometimes, as well know, even for faithful people who pray and do everything they know to do, the night comes, the darkness falls, and tragedy is not avoided. Trouble comes even to the most faithful of lives, even the most faithful of prayers, tragedy can come.

On the night of November 14, 1940, German bombs fell all night on the gritty, industrial town of Coventry. Men and women, boys and girls fled into bomb shelters, but with too little warning, there wasn’t time for everyone and hundreds died that night. In the heart of the city, and breaking the heart of the people, Coventry’s beloved cathedral was reduced almost to total destruction. Only the tower and some of the outer wall remained at dawn’s early light. It stood ruined. This is not a story of God’s preservation in the face of danger. It is a story of death, destruction, horror, and tragedy. Sometimes bad things happen, terrible and awful things. Thus the cross.

What then? How do you respond? This is that kind of story.

The very next day, two fallen charred roof beams were bound together and set up in the shape of a cross amongst the ruins. They still stand there today. They decided the very next day that they must rebuild. Coventry bears witness to suffering endured and remembered as a sign of new life from the worst kind of suffering. It bears witness to those life experiences when everything you’ve known is taken away--when the ground shakes under your feet and the storm rages. And then you pick up the pieces, and you’re not alone.

I know a woman, I suspect you may know someone like her, who is in mid-life and recently finalized a divorce from a very difficult situation. She asks: What now? My marriage is over, I’d given up my job, so I have no career; my house is gone; the money is gone. I can’t believe my life has come to this. Hers is a life that has been blown apart, a life that stands amongst the charred ruins of her hopes and dreams. Now, she will rebuild. The cross for her is a charred, old rugged cross fashioned from the life she knew, but it will stand for the life that will be born now. She will be different, but she is beginning again. The shell of the old will always be there, but we begin again. We must.

At Coventry, they made the decision to keep the burnt shell of the ruined Cathedral and construct a new church right next to it. The ruins were conserved and stand today as a memorial and remembrance of war, the suffering they endured, and everything they lost. Go there today and stand in the ruins of the old and then walk into the huge expanse of the new, built in the 1960s. What they'll say is that it's one church, not two churches next to each other, old and new, the one we left behind and the one we're now in. What they say is it's one church, the old and the new, death and life, endings and beginnings. It's one church; it's one life. It bears witness to grief and loss that stay with us and leave their scars on our souls. They are not forgotten. Scars tell sacred stories. Some of them, like the wounds in Christ's hands, become signs of hope and death and resurrection.

Iona Abbey.

Assisi survived the night. Coventry picked up the pieces as soon as morning dawned. Sometimes it takes much longer. A 600-year-old church is on a remote, very small Island off the coast of another Island off the coast of Scotland, north of Coventry. You gotta want to get there to get there. Iona Abbey was built on the small island where Christianity came to Scotland almost a thousand years before. The Abbey flourished as a community of prayer, service, and witness to the gospel.

Then came trouble. The reformation in Scotland brought massive changes of all kinds. Communities of prayer like Iona were abandoned, and the community dismantled. The abbey itself was left to the harsh elements and to the passing of time. It became a deserted ruin, a curiosity alone on a rocky outpost on the wild Atlantic Ocean. These kinds of ruins dot the Scottish and European landscape. Today, they are tourist sites and Instagram nostalgia. This was to be Iona's silent fate for hundreds of years. But then, in the silence, in the loneliness, in the alone-ness, something stirred.

It stirred first in a man from the city of Glasgow, an unconventional pastor named George MacLeod. In the early 1900s, he led groups of young men and women to the island to restore the old, ruined Abbey. They did beautiful work. I've seen volunteer construction work. These guys were good. After hundreds of years, they brought the abbey back to life and established a new community within the old walls and under a new roof. The heartbeat of the old abbey began to beat again. It's not a tourist site; it's not a museum. It is once again a center of prayer and gospel witness. As remote as it is, the Iona Community today receives pilgrims from all over the world. Ruth Harvey, the current leader of the community, said, "This is not a hotel or a conference centre. People come for reflection and inspiration, and to explore issues of importance – the environment, poverty, migration, equality – in the context of a Christian community and in a beautiful, rugged landscape."

Iona was abandoned. And then ruined and alone. And then almost forgotten. But God didn't forget it. Where Christianity began in Scotland, it would begin again. The God who calls us to remember in Deuteronomy is the God who remembers his people, and when

God remembers, God acts. There is no daylight between God's remembrance and God's activity in the Bible. When God remembers, God moves. And God does not forget you.

Iona bears witness to God's grace, no matter how long it takes. I think of a person whose faith is lost, buried under the rubble and abandonment of years that go by, but then time does some healing, and then comes a stirring, and something new and beautiful is reborn from within the old church hurt, within the old life that was. I think of a marriage grown cold. And then a stirring and a new chapter begins seemingly out of nowhere, a fresh wind blows. An old wineskin holds new wine. Sometimes, it works. God's not done with you yet.

At times Israel thought they'd been forgotten on their long journey. We don't soon forget the long, dark nights of the soul. If you are in one now, take this to heart: the daylight will come again. You are not forgotten. God's not done with you yet.

Assisi. Coventry. Iona. Other churches all over the world. Christian communities in the world each bearing witness to God's grace, redemption, and renewal. There's something more, too. Their stories as Christian stories are incomplete without this one important thing that they all share. One important thing that transcends their differences and time and circumstance.

None of the three communities did what they did, or understand what God did for, through, and in them, for themselves. It was always for others. That's what really makes these stories stories to pass on and on and on.

Assisi in WWII saved the 800-year-old church building, but everything they all did really was to save the lives of Jews—the Jewish mommies and daddies and children—who took refuge in their city from the Nazis. The ordinary people of the town took them in. All of them. Not a single life of a Jewish person was lost in Assisi, not one. When the moment of testing came, those people who worshipped Christ with the story of St. Francis all around them, knew what to do. And they did it. Remembering is intertwined with response. Thanks be to God.

Coventry didn't rebuild the 700-year-old church out of defiance or national pride. Shortly after the blitz, the leader of the cathedral etched two words in the altar of the ruins that remain there to this day: "Father Forgive." He said, "When the war was over, we should work with those who had been enemies to build a kinder, more Christ-like world." They kept the ruins of the cathedral as a symbol of resurrection and renewal and hope and honesty, in clear eyes of the danger of all that has been before and in hope of what can rise from the ashes of our lives. Today, Coventry Cathedral—its church and its congregation—is known all over the world as an icon of peace and reconciliation, and holds the hope—as distant as it may seem on most days—the hope of peace in the world. They partner with a sister church in Berlin that also kept its ruins from its church, bombed by Allies' bombs. Together, these congregations bear witness to Christian hope for peace in a world that can be so violent and so dispiriting. When the moment of sorrow and suffering came, those

people looked to the charred cross and their own wounds and knew what to do. Thanks be to God.

And likewise, Iona's 600-year-old abbey wasn't rebuilt just because it's beautiful and would make a nice retreat for Baptist pastors on sabbatical trips. Pastor MacLeod's commitment wasn't to a rocky outpost in the Atlantic. It was to the inner city of Glasgow. The restoration of Iona Abbey on the island was a project to train young ministers in a spirituality of renewal and ministry when all looks lost and hopeless. It was never to be just a retreat, but the heart of a new movement of the gospel in communities that also need to be rebuilt in every way. From that experience and community comes music like the one we sing "Take me as I am. Summon out what I shall be." When the stirring came, Iona was waiting, patiently, to be the symbol that no one is forgotten; no one is alone. God remembers you.

And just like here, in what we're working toward, it's sometimes about the buildings. But it's not about the buildings. It's about our life together and our lives in God. By God's grace, what we do here adds a few more lines in the story of the lives of Christians across the world who have borne witness to the good news of the gospel and embodied the spirit of Christ in joy, sometimes in suffering, and always in hope.

We are the children and the children's children of Israel on the banks of the Jordan...
 ...of Assisi, giving and receiving protection to people whose lives are in danger...
 ...of Coventry, suffering, forgiving, and holding that suffering, even as we pray for peace...
 ...of Iona, lost and then found...
 ...of all people of faith anywhere at any time who broke bread and remembered.

The stories of their lives and faith are passed to us. And now we, each of us, through our churches we build, and the life we live together remember and pass the story on. We bear witness. Remember... in courage and love, in grace in suffering, in light in the darkness... God is there. And God is here, in our stories. Stories that are still being written in our lives. God is with you. God is good. Do not forget, all the days of your life. Bear witness.

Amen.