

What We Witness – Matthew 3:13-17, Acts 10:34-43

Rev. Matt Nieman

January 8, 2023

My sons and I were watching Monday Night Football this week, and during the first quarter, Buffalo Bills defender Damar Hamlin made a rather routine tackle on Bengals wide receiver Tee Higgins. Following the tackle, we and the rest of America watching at the stadium and on television witnessed Hamlin stand up and then collapse unconscious on the field.

Team doctors and paramedics spent the next nine minutes doing CPR on him. The television cameras rightly backed away, offering only wide shots of the field and the stadium while resuscitation efforts ensued.

However, cameras did capture the reactions of the many players to this tragic event. The expressions told of the awful sight they witnessed first-hand: chest compressions and an AED shocking Hamlin's heart back to life. Those are images they won't soon, if ever, forget.

When I was a kid in elementary school, our high school basketball team was playing our cross-town rivals in a tournament game. The gym was packed. And sitting near where my parents were sitting (I was farther down sitting with some friends as I recall) was the retired superintendent of schools and his wife. Tragically during the game, he had a heart attack in the bleachers. The game was stopped, a crowd of people huddled around him to treat him. And in addition to remembering that mass of people, which included a doctor doing CPR, I remember my father later escorting the man's wife across the gym floor as she left the building. Her husband died in that gym that night. The images of what I witnessed are still fresh.

We all witness tragedy to different degrees. The images our eyes capture are forever burned into our memories. They will never leave.

We also witness everyday realities that present challenges to us as a society.

In the Wall Street Journal this week, William Galston wrote an opinion piece titled, “America is a Sick Society.” That headline will get your attention.

In it, he talked about how the country is literally sick and has been getting sicker for the last couple of decades. He highlighted three areas that reflect how ill we are.

First, life expectancy in the country is lower than it should be and getting lower. In 2019, before the pandemic, we ranked 29th in life expectancy out of 38 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. This is largely due to our infant mortality rate, which ranks 33rd among those member nations.

Aiding the decline in life expectancy, we now lead the world in drug overdoses. In 2000, 17,000 people died of overdoses. In 2021, the number had increased to 107,000.

In the last three years, the Covid death rate has made things worse. Life expectancy here now is 76 years of age, the lowest since 1996.

The second great sickness we suffer from is obesity. Between 2000 and 2020, the obesity rate in the U.S. has grown from 30.5 percent to 41.9 percent. Yep, more than 4 out of 10 of us are obese, and of course obesity leads to quite a number of illnesses. Dare we say that exercising more and eating less may very well be our biggest life savers.

And the third great sickness we suffer from is gun violence, which has surged in the past decade after a couple decades of decline. Here again we lead the world, unfortunately. The U.S. rate of firearm homicides per million adults stands at 41, compared with 5 in Canada, 3 in France, 2 in Australia, and 1 in Germany.

Every day, you and I witness this sickness—from people dying younger than they should, to people being too heavy, to gun violence that ends life suddenly for far, far too many of our fellow citizens.

Our eyes see this, and we remember.

Fortunately, our eyes also witness amazingly beautiful moments. We witness births, weddings, graduations, moments of great achievement, sunrises and sunsets, people working together amid differences, musical performances that move us to tears, athletic competitions that leave us

overjoyed (when our teams win), or the gift of healing reinvigorating our bodies or our relationships.

And there are other beautiful moments, too, that have occurred throughout history.

On Christmas Day in 1914, during the height of World War I, British and German troops—enemies to each other—amazingly and almost miraculously stopped fighting to sing Christmas carols, play soccer, and exchange gifts (ration). It was a peaceful gem in one of the bloodiest wars in history.

Imagine being a witness to that.

Speaking of wars, how about the end of World War II in 1945? Certainly a beautiful moment for the allied nations who had sacrificed so much human capital and achieved a victory for freedom and liberty over evil and tyranny.

Imagine being a witness to the front pages of the nation's newspapers when they announced the war was over, that there was finally peace.

Every two years, the world comes together for the Olympic games (either winter or summer). And it's fair to say there are many beautiful moments over those two weeks that highlight great competition, sportsmanship, and the coming together of the world's many ethnicities and nationalities despite political differences that otherwise divide.

It's great to witness the beauty of the Olympics.

We witness so much—some bad, some good. Much of what we witness we never forget. What do we do with those images?

In the book of Acts, the early church had been formed. And its leader was Peter, who spoke to the gathered crowd and recounted for them all they had witnessed. They had seen with their own eyes how Jesus of Nazareth had been anointed by God with the power of the Holy Spirit, how he had done good and healed all who were oppressed. And then, they saw him after his resurrection! They ate and drank with him after he had risen! They had witnessed this with their own eyes!

Imagine how all this transformed their lives! The healing miracles, the teaching that had left everybody spell-bound. The sight of him being alive after he had been put to death. Those images had to have been

burned into their brains—hopefully in ways that left them appreciative of his power and love, but maybe also a bit fearful of what all this meant for them.

What were they to do with what they had seen?

Peter says it pretty clearly: Jesus called them to therefore testify to others what they had seen about him, what they had witnessed, what they knew and believed about him. And the message came down to this: all who believe in him receive forgiveness.

In response to what they witnessed in Jesus, they were to go and testify to the forgiveness God grants us in Jesus Christ.

With all that we witness in our lives, there's really not all that much we can do with those memories (the bad stuff or the good stuff)—other than to remember them if they engender fondness and joy.

But when it comes to what we know and have seen about Jesus, we'd be included in what Peter saw as his and his contemporaries' mission: tell others about what you've seen.

Today, we also mark Jesus' baptism. And in reading the account of his in Matthew 3, we're reminded of our own baptisms—how we metaphorically go down into the water stained by our sin and come out of the water cleansed and renewed. And that's due to the forgiving power of God.

So when we remember our own baptisms today, it should help us to see with new eyes the working of the Spirit. And therefore, it can motivate us to be beacons of the forgiving and grace-filled light of Jesus Christ.

Like you, I've witnessed many acts of love, generosity, and kindness. They point to the ultimate author of all love that is practiced. Scripture says we love because God first loved us. Indeed. Jesus is the epitome of that love. So when we see people doing wonderful things for others, or when we read again and imagine Jesus coming up out of the water in the Jordan River, having been baptized by John, those images settle us into a spirit of gratitude and testimony. And our testimony comes not only through our own sharing of Jesus' story, but by the ways we treat one another—in sacrificial love.

In my midweek video this week, I stressed not starting something new in 2023 if what we were doing in 2022 is already working. But now is a good time to be reminded that what we witness can be put to good use in this new year, at least the beautiful things.

And the beauty that lies in our Christian story is that Jesus lived, died, and rose—to forgive us and to save us. We are witnesses to this. We should share this gift.