

Imagining the grace to come

Witness is an act of trust in a God who sends us to see and tell of all the things God is doing.

by [Eric D. Barreto](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue
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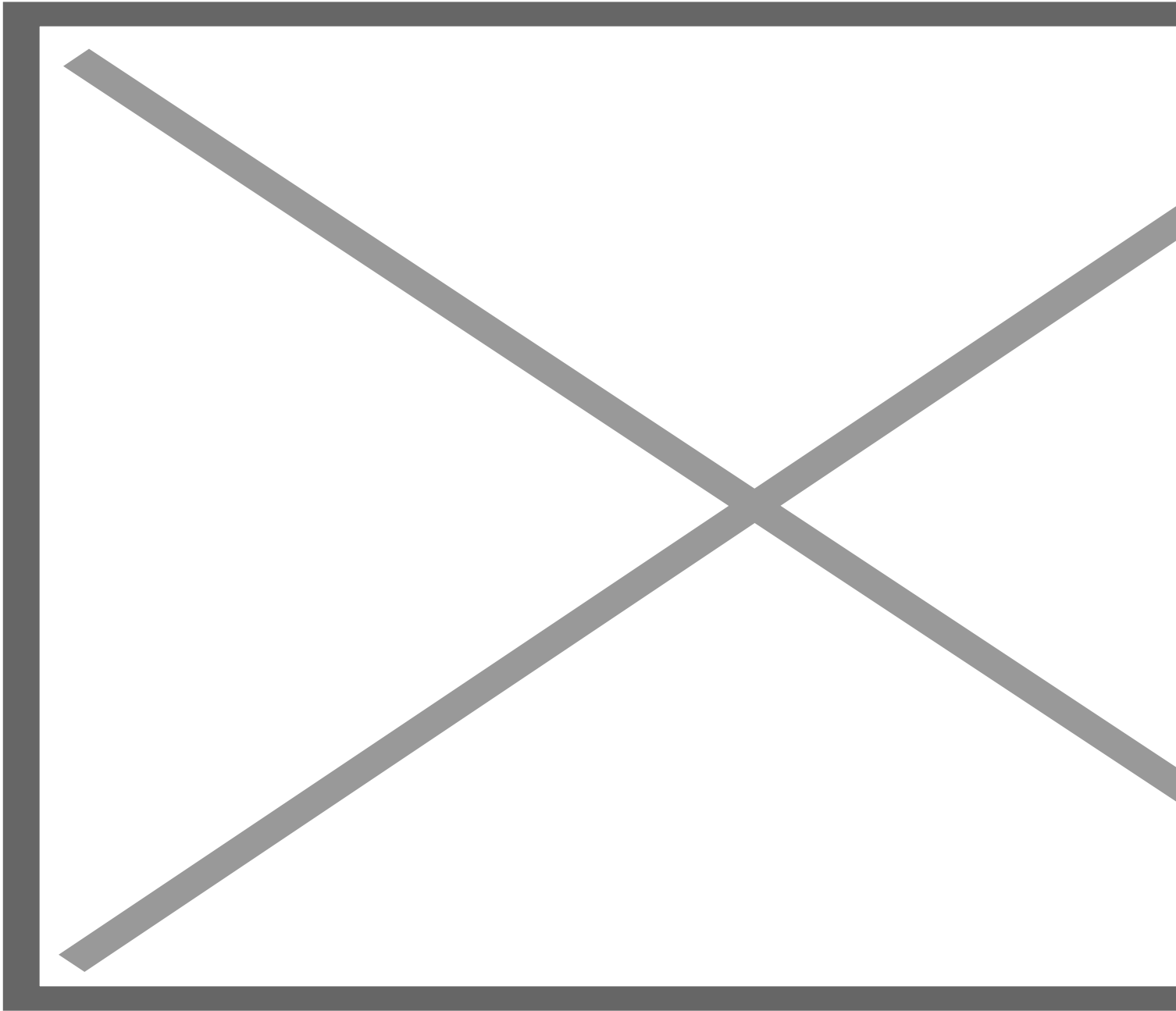


Illustration by Nicholas Blechman

We asked experienced pastors and seminary professors to put themselves in the apostle Paul's shoes: You're writing a letter to a present-day ministry leader. What issues do you want to address, and what theology can you bring to bear on them?

Dear Pastor,

Congratulations on your call! After so much time in seminary learning the aorist and the imperfect, history and theology (both clarifying and obscure), after years of following faithfully this sense of call shared with you by God's voice echoing among those saints in your life who have loved you into being after years of wondering what is next—I hope you have a sense of awe, expectation, and perhaps just a little fear in this moment. But even more, I hope you feel confident in God's promise to you and to the community you have been called to love.

When we last chatted, you asked me what you should know, what you should think about, what questions you should have in mind as you begin this ministry. As you are probably sensing already, seminary can only teach you so much; this is a feature of education and not a bug. The truth is that your teachers could not have possibly taught you everything you need to know, and this letter will only be yet another small bit of the lifetime of learning set out before you.

Nonetheless, I want to share some hopes I have for you and your ministry.

The pastor today needs to be someone who nurtures faithful trust. As our culture's collective trust in leaders and institutions crumbles, part of your task is to help restitch those bonds of love, grace, and discernment—bonds that have been pecked at and torn asunder by distrust and hatred, by caricature and resentment, by politicians and preachers alike. The politics and economics of division are profitable and deadly at the same time. They teach us to be suspicious of our neighbors, to assume their stories are ignorant or incomplete or so self-interested that we have nothing to learn from them. These systems are (mis)forming us by nurturing grievance in us. Our neighbors become competitors rather than partners, enemies rather than friends, intruders rather than gifts.

Your work helping to form a community where folks yearn for and work for the restitching of bonds of trust will make it possible for us to bear witness to God's goodness, of course, but even more to hear hope verbalized by our neighbors, too. As it turns out, our imagination for God's goodness is stilted by what we have seen, narrowed by our worries, constrained by our hopelessness.

In my classroom, I often encouraged you to think of scripture as a vital source of imagination about who God has been, who God is today, and who God promises to be in the future. Left to our own devices, we are prone to see death and scarcity and lack around every corner—especially in this moment of the church's life, when doom and division seem to stalk us relentlessly. In scripture, we can learn anew about God's ordinary yet surprising, life-giving, and disruptive activity among our predecessors in faith; that same activity continues to work among us today. Amid the grief you and your community will endure—the deaths you will experience, the disappointments you will face—your call as a pastor is to nurture an imagination that sees the possibilities of life wherever death reigns.

This is not a call to naïveté or positivity or cheap hope. No, the kind of hope scripture helps us imagine is a hard-won hope: a hope that looks at the grave and yearns for life, a hope that demands justice when oppression seems to reign, a hope that sees a future when expectation has waned.

In short, my friend, we are called to be witnesses. This is the call Jesus places on the shoulders of disciples who saw him strung up on an instrument of Roman cruelty and terror, friends whose hopes were dashed. “You shall be my witnesses,” Jesus says, “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

In the tradition in which I was nurtured, we knew for certain what it meant to be a witness: It meant that we had a call to share what Jesus had done for us. And the stakes of witnessing were oh so high, because were we not to share our witness, others might face the ultimate judgment. But I have come to see witness—the witness we are called to bear in light of the witness Jesus’ disciples bear in Acts—as far more thrilling than that, even scary.

After all, the disciples do not just proclaim how Jesus has moved in their midst; they come to know afresh and anew the many ways God, Jesus, and the Spirit alike have moved far ahead of them in ways they did not anticipate but, it turns out, God promised while they remained unaware. The work of witnessing to God’s goodness is always and inevitably the work of catching up to the relentless Spirit.

I have been thinking of witness alongside the tragic succession of deadly police responses to Black folk. Black communities have been sharing for a long time the dehumanizing and too often deadly encounters with police that shape how children are taught and how communities struggle. These are old, old stories. And yet so many people did not believe the witness of Black communities until smartphones proliferated, until such encounters could be readily captured on video. For too many people, the testimony of a community was insufficient. Too many demanded proof—proof that too often took on the form of a public performance of the death of Black folk.

Witness is an act of trust in a God who sends us to see and tell of all the things God has been doing all along. It is also an act of trust that God will be present in places I have never been and among peoples not my own. It is an act of trust that the stories our neighbors tell are true, reliable, transformative.

Witness is not a unilateral declaration. It is not just a series of words or propositions we share with others. It is not the sharing of all truth to those who completely lack it. It does not happen only when my lips are moving but also when my ears are listening carefully, when my eyes search for grace, when my body is in spaces where I can notice how God has already acted and spoken long before I was able to begin to witness.

Our witness is fundamentally a response to God’s activity, to God’s call, to the manifesting of God’s grace even unto the ends of the earth.

And here, I think, is the root of such faithful trust: Scripture teaches us that God’s grace is always wider and broader and greater and more expansive than we previously imagined. Whether it is Peter’s surprise at Cornelius’s home (Acts 10) or Philip’s encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch in the middle of nowhere (Acts 8:26–40) or Jesus’ reminder in Luke 4 that the prophets of God were sent to heal outsiders (Luke 4:22–27), God is continually teaching us to expect that however widely we understand God’s grace today, it will be wider tomorrow.

If you can help a community orient itself around this theological and scriptural truth, then the community you serve might just be primed for God’s perpetual surprise—a surprise not because God’s promises have changed but because we are always catching up to the Spirit’s leading, always lagging in our understanding of God’s promises.

Last is this encouragement, this exhortation. Sometimes, I find that pastors hope that the work of change can begin and end with persuasion, that strong arguments will win the day; I fall for this false hope regularly. Alas, there is not a single sermon or adult education session or pastoral visit that will effect the change I know you want to see, that God calls us to lead, for which a desperate world should—but perhaps is not able to—yearn.

Instead, the work of faithful change is seasonal and relational and long-standing. Moreover, we rarely get to see the fruits of our work; instead, we have to trust that the work we do will flourish in ways we may not see or even imagine. Plus, of course, transformation is truly and ultimately the work of the Spirit, as Acts tells us again and again.

And so the work of change begins and ends with love. Love the people you are called to serve. Love their stories and their joys and their foibles. Love them as God loves them. There you will find the heartbeat of your call, the center of your vocation.

With hope and love and great admiration,
Eric

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