

INI

The Transfiguration of our Lord / 17 January 2016

2 Peter 1,16-21

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson from Saint Peter's First Epistle, which was read earlier. Peter says:

For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitness of His majesty.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction. We may believe that today we live in a multi-cultural world and that truth is relative. But it was no different in the days of Jesus or the early apostles. They lived in a world that had many different religions. Think of the gods and goddess of the Greeks, the Romans, the Egyptians, and countless others. Many of the more sophisticated Greeks and Romans did not believe in the truth of their myths, that is, that they represented an objective reality, but they believed that these myths taught moral truths that would help people live properly. It seems that their ideas of moral truths built on fables are still to be found in our world. Today they find expression in so-called Christian theologians who teach that the miracles of the Bible and many Bible stories are what we would call myths or fairy tales – but they say that's OK, because they teach moral truths and can give meaning to life.

The apostle Peter and the other apostles did not have that concept of truth. As our text for today says, Peter proclaims that he was an eye witness of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He was not stupid. A few years after writing this letter he would be put to death by the

Roman authorities for his witness to Jesus, He Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14,6). Would you put your life on the line for a “moral truth” or a myth? I, for one, would not. And neither did Peter!

But Peter tells us truth is not only objective, that is, something that he and the other apostles personally witnessed, but it is supported by the Scriptures, and the Bible is reliable. It is not the work of people who decided to dream this up on their own, but rather consists of words of God as inspired by God the Holy Spirit. This brings me to the theme of today’s sermon: “**Jesus – No Myths Here, Only Reality!**” I’ll develop this theme in three points:

- 1) A Reliable Eye Witness;**
- 2) Jesus Is The Truth;** and,
- 3) The Bible Is Our Sure Source Of Knowledge.**

1) A Reliable Eye Witness. From the New Testament, we see that the apostles were concerned to present the objective reality of what they had seen and heard.

In his Gospel, the apostle John writes of Jesus:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory. (John 1,14)

In his first letter, John wrote more:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life – ² and the Life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the Eternal Life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us – ³ what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1,1-3)

Shortly after the first Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus ascended into heaven, both Peter and John were brought before the same high council of the Jewish leaders which had sentenced Jesus to death. The high priest told them not to keep speaking about Jesus. John and Peter, however, answered: “we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4,20).

This reflects what Jesus Himself told the disciples before His ascension: “and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, even to the remotest parts of the earth” (Acts 1,8).

In his missionary journeys, Paul referred to his conversion in which Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and told his listeners that Ananias of Damascus, an early Christian believer, had said, “For you will be a witness for Him – that is, Jesus – to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now, why do you delay? Arise and be baptized, to wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22,16-17).

For these men the truth was what they had seen and heard and touched.

They knew the difference between what we call objective truth and the man-made myths of pagan gods and goddesses, such as the sun being Apollo’s chariot racing through the sky. These concepts were classified as “worldly fables fit only for old women” (1 Timothy 4,7) – OK, today we could also say, “worldly fables fit only for old people.” Paul admonished Timothy, “Not [to pay] attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth” (Titus 1,14).

The admonition was needed because all such “worldly and empty chatter” (1 Timothy 6,20) only “turn men away from the truth” and lead men “astray from the faith” (1 Timothy 6,20).

But the purpose of the apostles was to turn people to the Truth, that is, to Jesus, and they wrote the truth down: “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20,31).

In distinguishing between truth and falsehood, between truth and fables, Paul wrote: “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is vain” (1 Corinthians 15,14). If something is vain, it is empty of meaning and worthless. But the message about Jesus has meaning and is worthwhile because

2) Jesus Is The Truth. What does Jesus mean when He says that He is the Truth? Does He mean that there is no truth in mathematics, or biology, or many other scholarly subjects apart from Him? No, He does not mean this.

When Jesus says He is the Truth, He is speaking of how God deals with our world and us as individuals. Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14,6). Even before His death Jesus said, “I am the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies” (John 11,25).

There are many people who do not believe in fables or fairy tales, but believe that they can find God in nature or in other people. There are others who believe that the Buddha will enlighten them to the real meaning of life. There are others who believe that they can come closer to God only if they follow the rules set forth in Hinduism or Islam. Others believe that only through praying to ancestors can they come close to God, as in Shinto. Others believe that all different religions lead to the same God and only sincerity matters. All of these ideas are different ways of saying that truth is relative and that we have to come to God instead of Him coming to us.

Jesus says something quite different, quite radical, and quite exclusive. Jesus says that people cannot come to God on their own, but that God has to come to them, and that the only way God comes to them in grace and forgiveness and mercy is through His Son, Jesus.

Jesus came from God and is God, born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem. Just to look at Him, no one would have known that Jesus was both true man and true God.

Only some of the disciples were privileged enough to have a glimpse of Jesus' divinity, and that was on the Mount of Transfiguration. There Moses and Elijah appeared to Jesus and Jesus was transformed so that He shone as bright as the sun. This brightness is a reflection of God's holiness, of His sinlessness. Nothing sinful and unclean can come into God's presence. Moses and Elijah spoke to Jesus of what was going to happen in Jerusalem, where he would have to suffer and die (Luke 9,31).

Then God's own voice told the disciples that Jesus is His beloved Son. Not only that, but in Jesus the Father was "well-pleased." And more: the disciples – and we – are to listen to Jesus!

In the Transfiguration, Jesus was being prepared for His suffering and death and the disciples were being prepared for Jesus' humiliation and suffering and death, so that even on Good Friday they might not lose hope before Easter Sunday morning.

After the Transfiguration, Jesus continued on to Jerusalem, where He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, and died. Note the specific historical reference: "under Pontius Pilate," who was a real Roman governor and ruled at a real point in history.

Jesus died to pay the price for sin, to pay the price neither we nor anyone else could pay. He is the perfect sacrificial Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. For you and I and the world He went into death, but on the third day he rose again from the dead, to show all that whoever believes in Him shall live as He now lives, even in the face of death.

Death, illness, or strife are neither pleasant nor good. But in the face of these enemies and much more, Jesus shows that He has won the victory. To stand at the grave is never pleasant. When a friend dies we shall miss that friend. From a human point of view, if we have to bury a spouse, a brother or sister, a parent, or even a child, it is even more heart wrenching.

But if those whom we loved or have known have died in Christ – that is, believing that Jesus died and rose again to pay the price for their sin – then we do not mourn like those who have no hope.

Buddha is dead, Mohammed is dead, ancestors are dead, and they or their teachings cannot provide hope at the grave. The gods and goddesses of other religions are at best the figments of people’s imaginations or at worse demonic manifestations – and none of these can provide hope at the grave. There is nothing worse than not having hope, or, having a false hope, putting your trust in fables.

But Jesus came so that people might have hope and might have life. Only through Jesus does God deal with us in forgiveness and mercy, and that on account of what Jesus did. Where do we find out about this life that Jesus promises and has earned for us?

3) The Bible Is Our Sure Source Of Truth. The Bible was written so “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20,31).

Jesus Christ is the center of the Scriptures. He is the center not only of the New Testament but also the Old Testament. Of the Old Testament, Luke reports that after His resurrection, Jesus met and spoke with to two disciples, and, “beginning with Moses and with all the prophets He – Jesus – explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24,27).

Jesus referred to all of Scripture because all of Scripture

is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3,16-17)

That word “inspired” is made up of two words, “God” and “breath” and means that all of Scripture is “God-breathed.” This is the same Greek word that speaks about a ship’s sail being filled with wind, and when Peter speaks about “men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from

God,” the same word for “moved” is also used in showing how a ship moves.

All of Scripture, then, is not a cleverly devised fable or myth, but true and profitable. Its unifying theme is the story of man’s rebellion and sin against God and also against other men, and how God always points to the coming of Jesus as the solution to the insurmountable problems of sin and of death.

I’ve used the illustration before, but it bears repeating. Quite a few years ago Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had a program devoted to the great books of the world. The speaker said every year he set aside several days to read the Bible through from cover to cover. He said that if, by the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, you have not seen Jesus coming, then you have not been paying attention!

If anyone reads the Bible and does not find Christ, then he is reading a book full of strange stories about peoples who lived a long time ago. Then he is reading a book filled with strange customs and regulations, some of which make a lot of sense, such as “do not murder,” “do not steal,” and some of which seem incomprehensible, such as “do not boil a calf in its mother’s milk” (Exodus 23,19), or “do not eat owls.” Then you will find a God who demands perfection and will punish people when they cannot do the impossible.

But if you read the Bible with Christ at the center then the Scriptures will make sense – all of Scripture! The Old and the New.

In the time after Jesus’ ascension, Philip the evangelist met an Ethiopian going back from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. The man was reading the book of Isaiah, chapter 53:

“He was led as a sheep to the slaughter;
And as a lamb before his shearers is silent,
So He does not open His mouth.
In humiliation His judgement was taken away;
Who shall describe His generation?”

For His life is removed from the earth.”

And the Ethiopian answered Philip and said, “Please, tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?” And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture preached Jesus to him. (Acts 8,32ff)

The result? The Ethiopian asked to be baptized, and so received the promise of Scripture, the forgiveness of sins, “for where there is forgiveness of sins there is life and salvation” (Luther, *Small Catechism*, The Lord’s Supper, 2). And as Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said: “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven – that is, the name of Jesus Christ – that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4,12).

The Scriptures only make sense in Christ. They make sense in how God deals with us for Jesus’ sake and how, as forgiven, we are to deal with others.

Conclusion. The Bible shows God coming to us in His Son, Jesus Christ. “For while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5,8). His victory over death assures us that we who have confessed our sins are forgiven and have life in His name (John 20,31). He is the Truth and the all of Scripture testifies to Him. “For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitness of His majesty.” Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

St. Stephen Lutheran Church of the East Bay & Central Valley
21290 Birch St.
Hayward, CA 94541–1538

SDG