

*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.*¹⁷ *For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”*¹⁸ *We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.*

¹⁹*And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*²⁰ *Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation.*²¹ *For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.* (2 Peter 1:16-21)

The Gospel is not just a Clever Story

Have you ever thought that a story was really clever? Maybe it was movie that surprised you. They pulled off some twist that you didn’t see coming. I thought *The Sixth Sense* was like that when I saw it almost twenty years ago. But there are other ways to be clever. Saying that a story is clever almost always implies that it isn’t true. Some people talk about “the big lie” – someone like Hitler invents a narrative that has no truth in it at all, but people buy it because it cleverly explains things or it resonates with what they want to believe. On a more down to earth level, sometimes children tell clever stories. You don’t really believe them, but you can’t help but be impressed. St. Peter talks to us this morning about cleverly invented stories. He’s talking about spiritual things. He recognizes how often what passes for spirituality is a big lie or something that resonates for us, so we want to believe it’s true. But it just isn’t true. The gospel is different. **The gospel is not just a clever story.**

I.

It’s no accident that we hear Peter saying these words today. This is the last Sunday before Lent begins. Lent is a time of repentance and reflection over what our sins cost. During Lent we follow Jesus down to the lowest and weakest that he ever got to be. So just before we do that, we stop and remind ourselves who he is by remembering the event in our gospel lesson for today: Jesus’ transfiguration. Peter uses that event as proof that our faith is greater than any other attempt to explain or understand God, because our faith is based on real facts. **The gospel is not just a clever story. It’s an eye-witness account.**

Peter says, **“We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”** Peter wanted his readers to grasp that Jesus’ power and coming are real. Now, the people he was writing to weren’t about to begin the season of Lent, like we are. But the heart of the message about Jesus is the fact that he was crucified. In that time and place, crucifixion meant weakness. You were only crucified, if you were powerless to stop it. Not just because it was a horrible, lingering death, but because it was viewed by Jews and gentiles alike as shameful. To the gentiles, it meant that you were an outcast, that you were someone who deserved to be spit on. To the Jews it was even worse. It meant that God had abandoned you to hell. Peter wanted his readers to understand that Jesus did go through that horrible, shameful death. But it didn’t change his power. He could’ve stopped it at any time, but he chose to endure it.

Peter wanted them to understand why, so he speaks of Jesus’ coming. The Greek word he uses most of the time refers to Jesus’ second coming. That’s when we will see his power. But Jesus hid it at the first coming so that he could die. No one would’ve crucified the Son of God in all his glory. No Roman soldier would’ve dared to spit on him or mock him or nail him to a cross if they could’ve seen that power of God pulsing through his body. So Jesus hid that power. But that power was always there and we will see it when he returns.

But if that’s the first time you believe in it, it’s going to be too late. Peter wanted us to know that power was real now. He wanted us to understand that the man who chose to be spit on and tortured and killed, was more than just a man. He was also the true Son of God come to save the world. So Peter reminded us of that event we call the Transfiguration. You heard the account in our gospel lesson this morning. Jesus took three of his disciples – Peter, James and John – up on a high mountain. There Jesus was transfigured. His appearance changed. His face and his clothing blazed with light. What was happening? Jesus was showing them his glory,

at least as much as they could stand. Then, two dead prophets, Moses and Elijah, appeared and spoke with Jesus. They were actually talking about his coming death. At that moment, Peter, who was terrified, did what humans often do when we don't know what else to: he began to talk. He offered to set up tents for Jesus and Moses and Elijah. But then a cloud covered them and God the Father spoke: **“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”** With that, it was over. They were alone with Jesus, looking the way he always looked.

But Peter saw that transformation. He saw the majesty of Christ. He tells us two important things about it. First of all, what the Father said. This was indeed more than a man. The blood and the pain, the humiliation and the glee of his enemies could not change that. The truth is, no human hatred could've conquered the Son of God. No Roman injustice or Jewish jealousy had the power to drive the God the Son to the cross. Jesus lowered himself to the very depths of hell because he wanted to. It was the only way to save you and me. It was the only way to pay for our sins.

Because that's true, Peter told us the other thing. He said, **“He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came.”** Jesus didn't have to glorify himself. He made himself nothing. God the Father gave him glory. God the Father made sure the disciples heard this testimony before our Lord ever went to the cross, just like he made sure that we had the Father's testimony later when Jesus rose. Why? So that we know that it's true. Anybody can claim anything they want about themselves. Sadly, church history is full of men who claimed to be Christ, or a prophet, or to have some special access to God. But God the Father claimed Jesus as his Son.

That means that he is our Savior. My friends, we're going to spend the next six weeks reminding ourselves that our sins sent Jesus to that cross. He was paying for us. He was dying the death that we deserve to die. He even suffered the hell that God says you and I have coming. Before it all began, God the Father pointed out just who was dying – the only person who could stand in the place of every sinner who will ever live, the only person who could win forgiveness and life for us, the only person who could make himself nothing and win by losing: the Son of God made flesh. Because he did all that, your sin and my sin is washed away forever. Because he did all that, we are forgiven and free. Lest there be any doubt about it, God gave us eye witnesses of Jesus' majesty. Peter, James and John saw his glory. They heard the Father's testimony. They shook with fear but eventually understood what it meant: this is Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

II.

That makes you feel better, right? Peter saw it and he told us about it. I don't doubt for a minute that it does. But if someone wanted to be difficult, they might say, “How do you know that Peter really saw it? What if he was making this all up?” They might go even further and say, “How do you know that Peter even wrote this letter?” Different people in history have challenged Peter's authorship. Finally, some people might say that eye-witness testimony isn't all that convincing. Psychologists have done endless studies that question how accurate our perceptions are and how accurate our memories are. So why should we believe Peter? He doesn't even have cell phone video to back him up! We believe him because this eye-witness testimony is not on the witness stand in a courtroom somewhere. It's recorded for us in the Bible. The Bible is more than just a human writing. God himself gave it to us. **The gospel is not just a clever story. It's the Word of God.**

Peter himself makes that point. He doesn't expect us to take all this on his word. It's God's word. Now, the way he makes the point is a little challenging. He says, **“And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”** What does that mean? Well, the update to our NIV Bible gives us a little different read. Specifically, it starts by saying, **“We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable.”** I think that's a fair translation of the Greek and it's certainly clearer. God gave us his prophetic word in the Old Testament. He pointed to Christ for 1500 years until the Savior was born. All that Peter is saying is built on that word. It is completely reliable because God cannot lie.

The New Testament, too, is a completely reliable, prophetic word. God gave it. We need to pay attention to it just like you pay attention to a light in a dark place. Most of you know that I like to read. Well, a couple of weeks ago, I was complaining about not having enough light in our living room to read. During the day, it's fine. But at night, it gets pretty dim. So my wife suggested a fairly obvious solution: moving a floor lamp so that it shines on the couch. That did it! We need light to see spiritually, too. We live in a dark place. This world doesn't know God. Our own hearts don't see God until he shines a light on us. How does he shine

that light? What is the lamp he uses? His word. That's where we learn about Jesus, about his birth and his death, about his transfiguration. We need that light for as long as we live here.

So God gives us that light. No prophet got to decide what to write, God gave them a message that he wanted his people to hear. Peter says something here that I make my catechism class students memorize every year: **“For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”** Peter didn't write what he wanted to write. He wrote what the Holy Spirit told him to write, so that it is not Peter's word we study any more than it's Isaiah's word. It's God own word, given through human writers. We call that teaching “inspiration” or “verbal inspiration.” God gave every word of the Bible to the men who wrote it.

Sometimes, people will say that inspiration means that the Bible is inspiring. It lifts us up and makes us closer to God. That's true. But it's not the same as what we're saying here. Finally, I hope that at least once in a while, I say something inspiring. I hope that pointing you to Jesus week after week and year after year builds up your faith. The gospel does that because it is the power of God. But Peter is saying something more here, something that I can't say about anything that I've ever written or ever will write. He's saying the Holy Spirit gave him the very words he put down on papyrus to send to the Christians who first read this letter. He's saying the Holy Spirit did the same for centuries until he gave us the entire Bible.

That's why we pay attention to it. That's why we trust it. It isn't just the word of men. It's the word of God. How do we know that? Because it says so. Now that's a circular argument, right? The devil could lead false teachers to say that God told them this or that. He's done that more times than we can count. So how is this different? The power of God is built into this message. He works when we read it. He works when we hear it. He works when we proclaim it. And he changes our hearts. The gospel convinces us all by itself. Then you know that what it says is true. That finally is what matters here. An unbeliever will never accept that argument. But so what? The Holy Spirit has pointed us to Jesus. This morning, he shows us the glory of the Son of God blazing from the human face of Mary's son. Jesus is true man. Jesus is true God. He is our Savior.

All our sins are gone because of him. All our fears are silenced in his love. All our weaknesses and sicknesses and defeats are healed in his death and resurrection. We are forgiven. We are loved. We are his. That isn't just a clever story. It's not a big lie. It isn't some invention of the early church. It's the gospel, the good news, from God. He says that it's true. He reaches into our hearts and makes us know that. Then he tells, “Pay attention to this message.” It is the power to conquer doubt when it comes. It is the power to change your life and your heart. Is it the comfort that you need every day. It is the love of God at your fingertips. It is the message about Christ. Amen.