

“Constructing a Faith-full Faith”

II Peter 1:16-22

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I want to start today with a story but it's not one I am especially enamored of nor recommend as an example of proper living for young people so if you're under 25 maybe you shouldn't listen. In 1969, I was offered the opportunity by my uncle, well your uncle too, to spend about a year touring Southeast Asia. In offering this, our uncle gave me a choice of Southeast Asia for the year or Leavenworth Kansas for 5 to 10. I took Southeast Asia where long walks in the rice paddies and then the jungle involved attempts to convince residents of the joy and righteousness of the American way of life. Since I stand before you today, I can only claim that I was at least in some way successful in this venture. In December of 1969, my uncle informed me that I could go home and enjoy the rest of my life reveling in the gratefulness of my neighbors.

Upon my return, I enrolled in college where my goals were to drink as much beer as possible and convince as many young women as possible of my wit, charm, and humor, my good looks being apparent for all to see. In addition, I did enroll in some educational classes. One of these was a history course, it being second semester, which was to enlighten me regarding the history of the United States from 1850 to the present. One fine spring day, I strolled into this class to hear about the US in the 1950's. I entered with no particular political agenda nor any expectations of profound intellectual challenge. Ninety minutes later I exited with a completely changed perspective on all things American. I entered uninvolved and with little understanding of my involvement in the historical act we call Vietnam and left absolutely convinced that its perpetration was an act of pure and simple political folly if not a violation of all that is right and moral!

Now that's the closest I can come to a story of my conversion from one perspective or understanding to another but I tell it as a preface to discussing the text of second Peter which we've read. The text is one in which the writer, an unknown person who represents him or herself as Peter, defends the perspective of those who believe that Jesus is the Christ. It begins with a disclaimer that what believers follow is not some cleverly devised myths but the truth of knowing Christ. Those who believed were a community who had been converted from one understanding or faith in reality to another. They had been confronted with the stories which had been passed down from apostle to convert to story teller to believer and, no, these were not stories of cleverly constructed myths but truths. And to assure the listener/reader the writer offers the story of the transfiguration as though she or he had been there.

Now let me step aside for a moment and say a couple words about our text. It is almost certain that his book we call 2nd Peter was not written by Peter or at least not by the Peter spoken of in the Gospels. The references within the book are to events and circumstances which happened sometime in the 2nd Century of the Common Era. This would have been long after the disciple or Apostle referred to as Peter's death. For example in the 3rd chapter, there is mention of a collection of Paul's writings and it is pretty well accepted by all Biblical scholars and students that these writings were not gathered into any sort of corpus until at least 90 of the common Era and it would have only be later that they would be accepted as scripture by the general believing community.

The second thing I want to do is speculate that what was happening in this letter is a re-thinking of the message of the church. The return of Jesus as the risen Christ who was expected and had been promised had not taken place. And this return was not simply that Jesus had arisen but the expectation that this return would end the suffering and oppression of the world and bring history as known then to an end especially the oppression fomented by the Romans.

Now to return to the text and consider what it's saying to its "original" audience. It is a response to an allegation that those who had converted to Christianity or the Way as it was probably called then, were converted using false ideas, cleverly devised myths. In reply our writer tells the story of the transfiguration as witnessed by Peter and others. And then the writer turns to the issue of prophecy which is described as a light shining in the darkness. There are probably several things going on here.

The writer is seeing to link the transfiguration and its symbolism of the light of God shining through Jesus and the voice of God speaking of Jesus to the voices of the prophets which the community knows and interprets as a means of living and of judging how they and the community exist together. The writer admonishes us that our reading and interpretation of scripture can't be just what's good or right for "me". The prophecy of scripture requires interpretation in light of what a community of men and women moved by God, believe is the call of God in the words of those prophets. God's presence and call can't be something we find on our own, in isolation, away from all others. God's presence and call is known in conversation with, in dialogue with our communities. If it is only good for me than it's probably not God's word. Remember the prophets spoke for the justice as experienced in community by all. It is not a justice for, by, and only about one person but a justice which is by, for, and about the community and all its members.

Additionally, the writer is assuring the reader/hearer that God continues with the believing community despite the reality that the expected apocalyptic in-breaking of God which would have ended history has not happened. It was expected in this community that there would be a second coming of Jesus, a return of the savior to end the oppression and degradation of the world and its inhabitants. Probably part of the reason for our opening verses today is a response to those who were taunting the believing community regarding this and reminding them that such an in-breaking had not happened, like they needed to be reminded. The taunt must have accused the leaders of the community of using clever myths to win over or convert their followers.

So we have in second Peter a pericope written by and for a community attacked for its faith and challenged regarding its beliefs. The taunts and catcalls seem obvious and we need recognize that the early church, the Way existed in a time of great tension and with attacks upon it from all sides. So that's a nice exegesis of this but now let's ask what does that have to do with Covenant and this worshipping community in 2011 in Madison? I offer you three ideas with which to grapple and toss aside as you wish.

First, we are not here due to cleverly devised myths. We don't join on Sunday to be fed pabulum and told Jesus saves. We join because we believe God calls us to struggle with, confront, and live out a faith which calls us to do justice. AND WE AREN'T ALWAYS SURE WHAT THAT MEANS and it does evolve and change as our understanding of what is good and right changes. The example of my experience regarding my understanding of what Vietnam was and means was offered not because my experience was so unique but rather to remind us that we change, the communal understanding

changes. BUT, and this may be the most difficult part of this for me at least, our understanding of God's presence and God's call to do justice changes. AND it changes as we in this community struggle together, in what I call the conversation of faith to understand that call. It isn't what "I" understand and celebrate. It is what we as a community understand and celebrate. And the conversation means that our faith evolves, changes, grows as the community evolves, changes, grows in its understanding.

Now the practical reality of what it means to be part of the community of faith involved in this conversation can be found here, right now. Look around this room, this auditorium, this sanctuary. In here, are gathered a rather eclectic group of folk some of whom think Scott Walker is evil incarnate and others who believe Wisconsin is doomed if we don't support his administration and this diverse community is going to share in a few moments our most sacred sacrament. WE are going to break bread and drink wine together as a community. AND we are not afraid to talk about collective bargaining and union rights and budget woes and expensive benefit packages and what is justice in this place, at this time. AND we have to do that or we fall into the trap of devising clever myths as a reason for being here, myths which deny our involvement but more importantly God's involvement, participation with us in the every day, what some would call the mundane. See I believe our faith means considering justice not simply being that which is assuring me my due but assuring all in the community theirs. AND that means sometimes we need to compromise and reconsider and rethink. This is a congregation and a denomination which has done that which is why we have these very interesting and ongoing conversations regarding things like sexuality but also economic justice and political economy.

Second, we are not here to be saved but to rekindle and rebirth a faith which calls us to be the light of the world that it might be know God's presence and God's call. We are here to listen for and learn about God's call to us and leave from here committed to respond to God's presence with our lives. We know that that call and that presence can't be limited nor is it to be found by "me" alone. It is a call and a presence to be experienced and acknowledged as we construct a public faith through a worshiping community that is in continual conversation with each other and the world. It is a faith which calls us not to yesterday but to tomorrow and it beckons us to be responsible for how we construct that future that all might know God's presence and God's justice.

And lastly, we don't just limit our conversation to this arena, this sanctuary. But we reach out to the world for we know it is out there that God is calling and speaking and enabling us to do and to live our faith. We believe we are called to share with the world our faith for it is a faith which offers us hope, joy, peace, pleasure, and a continuing call to live such. We are not burdened by our faith but liberated by it. We are freed from the fear of the other and from the cynical myths which are fomented by those who want only what is good for them. We believe that it is in the conversation that justice and love and peace and pleasure are to be found even when that conversation makes us uncomfortable and causes us to change and to grow and to learn. We believe with second Peter that women and men moved by God's presence will witness to God's call and work for such justice, joy, pleasure and peace. For you see evangelism for us ought not be about somehow or other "saving" others by offering them the joy, hope, and pleasure of God's presence but also learning from them and growing with them in faith.

The writer of Second Peter is an unknown who sought to remind the readers/hearers/listeners that God's presence and promise is to be found not through individual faith but in a continuing struggle for understanding and truth as one participated in the community of faith. May we seek to build here a place where all are welcome and where all go forth to bring God's continuing call for justice and hope to the world. AMEN.