

Revealing the Truth  
Matthew 17:1–9; 2 Peter 1:16–21  
Saturday, February 19, 2023 (Transfiguration)

Let us pray: You have already spoken, Lord. Help us to *hear* the word that you have spoken, that it might be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, in Christ. Amen.

Alright, before we get into today's sermon, I have to say something. Two weeks ago, we talked in the sermon about conspiracy theories and how we live in a post-truth culture, in which we can no longer agree on basic facts, and we don't know who to trust. People think that everyone has an agenda, and the whole thing is rigged. As an example of that, I mentioned how so many people were complaining about the officiating in the NFL conference championship games, where the Eagles played the 49ers and the Chiefs played the Bengals. There were a lot of bad calls in those games, and people pointed to that as a way of saying, "The NFL wants certain teams to win, so they're making calls in their favor. The whole thing is rigged!" I dismissed that. But I am here to tell you today, it's *true*. All of it. The officials *did not want* the Eagles to win the Super Bowl. They *gave* us the calls that let us *get* there, just so they could rip our hearts out. It was all a conspiracy. The whole thing was *rigged*. (Same with the World Series, but whatever.)

In the days after that sermon, I had conversations with a lot of you about conspiracy theories that you have encountered. You run into people who say something that seems so absolutely crazy, but they believe it wholeheartedly, and so how do you *respond* to that? How do you *talk* to people about that and say, "No, that's actually not true," in a way that doesn't lead to an argument? And more than that, how do we *know* what is true and what is not? How do we discern that in a post-truth culture? And in these conversations that I had with you, I was reminded of something.

When I was in sixth grade, there was an English teacher named Mrs. Verlaan. She was in her 60s; a tough teacher – she could be strict – but she was very nice. But what I remember about Mrs. Verlaan was that she had numbers tattooed on her arm, because when she was around the age that I was then, she was placed in a Nazi concentration camp during the Holocaust. I had heard *stories* about the Holocaust, read about it in books and seen it in movies, but this was the first person I had ever *met* who had *been there* and seen it with her own eyes and had *proof* of it on her body.

Years later, I encountered someone who said that the Holocaust did not happen; that it was *made up* as a part of some Jewish power conspiracy. And I said, “Wait a minute. I know Mrs. Verlaan. I saw the numbers on her arm, and I heard her stories. It changed her for the rest of her life. You cannot tell me that did not happen. I know someone who was there.” Mrs. Verlaan died in 2014, as many Holocaust survivors are now, as well as the WWII soldiers who saw those camps. And with them is dying those firsthand accounts and the proof of what they experienced. Now, it’s up to people like *us* to say, “No, I knew this person. I heard the stories. I saw the numbers. This happened.” But one day, the people who *knew* them and *heard* the stories from them will be gone, and it becomes easier and easier for people to deny that it happened at all.

Now, the reason I mention this is because 2,000 years ago, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up to the top of a mountain, where *something happened*. Jesus was transfigured before them. His face started radiating light, and then Moses and the prophet Elijah appeared next to him. A bright cloud overshadowed them, and Peter, James, and John heard the voice of God say, “This is my Son, the Beloved. With him I am well pleased. Listen to him.” As the story about that

event spread, people apparently said, “Oh, come on. That didn’t happen. That’s just a story that the Christians tell. It’s a myth.”

And in response to that, we get our scripture reading from *who?* Peter. Who was *there*. And he says, “We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed.” Peter is saying, “Don’t tell me it didn’t happen. I was *there*.”

But *we* were *not*. Neither was anyone we *know*. Or anyone who *knew someone* who knew someone who was there. Or anyone who knew someone who knew someone who knew someone who was there. We are 2,000 years removed from this. So how do we *know* that it happened? We can *read it* here. But I can go online and read any number of things that are not true. How do we know that what is being told to us is true?

If we’re being honest, the first thing we have to admit is that we *can’t*. We cannot *know* with any degree of *certainty*. We cannot *prove*. It’s an act of faith. And faith is *trusting God* where we cannot see and have no proof.

So many of the problems that we are facing as a society are rooted in our *certainty* that we are *right*. That the things *I* believe, the way *I* am following is the *right* way, and if you think differently, you’re wrong or stupid or crazy. So many people are lacking the humility and the faith to be able to say, “You know what? I don’t know. I *trust*, but I don’t *know*.” The *truth*

does not belong to any one of us (or any *group* among us). The truth belongs to God, and *all* truth is *God's* truth, whether it fits with our preconceived understandings or political beliefs or whatever. *Jesus Christ* is the way, the truth, and the life, and Jesus Christ does not belong to *us*. *We* belong to *him*. So that means that the way does not belong to us (*our* way is not the right way), the truth does not belong to us, and life does not belong to us.

So many of our disagreements, our culture wars, are rooted in our understanding of the nature and role of faith; our understanding of *who Jesus is*. And some people might say, "I don't believe in Jesus." Well, *that's* a belief in Jesus! The belief that Jesus *is not* God with us is believing something about Jesus. The difference between conservatives and progressives is not just because of our stance on political issues. It is because of differing *worldviews*, and those worldviews arise from our understanding of God. Either, "There *is* a God, and *this* is how God is, and so this is how we should live," or, "There *isn't* a God, and so *this* is how we should live." "God is loving and kind and forgiving, and that is how God wants *us* to be," or, "God is holy and has very clear expectations for how God wants us to live." While those things are not mutually exclusive – it's not *either/or* – those are the lines that we divide ourselves along.

Our worldviews are based (in part) on our understanding of the nature of God and faith, and our understanding of the nature of God and faith is based on our interpretation of scripture.

Now, some people will say, "I don't *interpret* scripture. I just read it. It says what it says." But *every* reading of scripture is an act of interpretation. The New Testament was written in Greek. But Jesus didn't speak Greek. He spoke Hebrew. As less and less Christians spoke Hebrew, they *wrote* it in Greek and translated the Old Testament into Greek. Then as less and less Christians spoke Greek, they translated it all into Latin. Then as less and less Christians spoke

Latin, they translated it into English. And with every translation came interpretive decisions. “Does this word mean *this* or *that*?” And some of the choices they made significantly impacted our understanding of what was being said.

We *all* interpret scripture. We all make decisions – sometimes unconsciously – about which parts of the Bible we give authority and which we don’t. We emphasize some over others. And when we say, “What does this mean for *me*,” that is an act of interpretation. We *all* interpret scripture. The challenge is to interpret *faithfully*. It is to open ourselves up to hear, not the word that *we* want to hear or reinforce what we *already* believe, but to hear the word that God is speaking to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter says, “First of all, you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

How do we know that what we are reading here is true; that what we’re basing our lives on is true? How do we discern truth in a post-truth culture? Not by our own wisdom or ability, but by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. The Holy Spirit helps us understand scripture. The Holy Spirit helps us believe. The Holy Spirit binds us to Jesus Christ over the chasm of time and place that separates us physically from him. The Holy Spirit helps us discern truth from untruth. The Holy Spirit gives us the courage that we need to *live out* what we believe; to live in ways that trust God.

It’s not a matter of, “If I *try* hard enough, if I *read* enough and *study* enough, *then* I will be able to understand scripture and live a life of faith.” The *good news* that the Transfiguration speaks to us is that we do not come to know Jesus Christ through our own striving. We come to know

Jesus Christ through *revelation*. Jesus is *revealed* to us, *made known* to us. Peter, James, and John did nothing to make the Transfiguration happen. They just stood by in awe as the glory of God was revealed to them. It was *revealed* to them who Jesus was, when the voice of God spoke from the cloud, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” They did not figure that out on their own, and *we* do not figure all of this out on our own. The word that God spoke to them on that mountain is the same that God speaks to us: “Listen to him.”

How do we know what is true and good and right? Listen to him. And *how* do we listen to him? Through the reading of scripture and prayer. Each morning I read a Psalm and a chapter from the gospels, and I say, “What are you saying to me in this, Lord?” Then I sit in silence and listen. God can speak to us any number of ways, but unless we are intentional about listening, creating space in our lives where we can *listen*, we might not *hear* what God is saying to us. It’s about taking a break from the noisy busyness of life and creating space where we can say, “Reveal yourself to me, Lord. Help me to *know* you. Help me to understand.” It’s about letting go of our certainty and, in humility, opening ourselves up to being transformed by the Word of God.

Peter says, “You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” The lamp shining in a dark place is the Word of God that illumines our hearts and minds and the path before us. And the morning star that rises in our hearts is Jesus Christ. How do we know what is true in a post-truth culture? *Listen to him*. Be attentive to the Word of God, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ will rise in your heart and reveal to you the way, the truth, and the life that God is calling you to follow. Amen.