

"A Sure Thing"
2 Peter 1:16-21

February 26, 2017

The Transfiguration of our Lord

It seems that today many people evaluate the value and reality of things on the basis of their subjective experience, rather than objective fact. So, for example, McDonald's food is eaten by many, not because it is so nutritious, but because it tastes good. People rush to try alternative medicines when they are sick, not always because the science has proven them to be effective, but often because people "feel" they will be better treatments than traditional medicine. Even in the marketplace of ideas, this methodology is employed. While some people discuss ideas by saying, "I think that...." (in other words, here are the facts to support my position), many more people start out by saying, "I feel that...(that is, what I desire or sense to be true). If we base the validity or importance of something upon experience, it is no wonder that we desire experience so much. We want those things that taste good, feel good, and seem good.

It is also no wonder that people evaluate their spiritual lives in the same way they evaluate their physical lives – by experience. People look to experience to determine the truthfulness or falseness of spiritual matters. They want a religious experience that makes them feel inspired. Vague spirituality is considered to be more authentic than mere religious dogma. A worship style which inspires good feelings is a top priority. McWorship like McDonalds may be more popular because of its taste, rather than its substance. People always rush to read the latest book about people who have seen angels, people who have had near death experiences where they have talked to God or visited heaven, and so on. These experiences are accepted as valid simply because someone has experienced them. People hear about these astounding experiences and desire them, some to the point of actively seeking them out or feeling something is lacking in their spiritual lives if they don't have them.

Today is the Transfiguration of our Lord and we look back and commemorate a wonderful religious experience for three of Jesus' disciples: Peter, James, and John. Jesus brought the three of them to the top of a mountain. There Jesus was "transfigured" before them. His face shone like the sun. His clothes became white as light. Two of the most famous men from the Old Testament appeared -- Moses, the man who led God's people out of Egypt and to whom God had given the 10 Commandments; and Elijah -- a prophet who boldly spoke for God and did many miracles. Both of them had spoken to God on a mountain top. Now they were conversing with God incarnate – Jesus Christ – about His upcoming departure to Jerusalem to suffer and die for the sin of the world. Then, a bright cloud came and overshadowed them. A voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."

Imagine this most fantastic of all religious experiences ever: the disciples saw Jesus' true glory as the Son of God which had been hidden; they saw the two most famous men of God - Moses and Elijah; and they heard God Himself speak. Who wouldn't want such an experience? It was so good that Peter offered to make three tents so Jesus, Moses, and Elijah would have a place to stay and continue this experience.

Many years later Peter wrote about those experiences in our epistle reading for today and he said, yes, we saw those things. We experienced God's glory. We were eyewitnesses of Jesus' majesty. We were with him on the mountain. We heard the voice from the Majestic Glory – God Himself. But, Peter says, after having many years to reflect, this he concluded that, those experiences are not the most important things.

Why? What's wrong with experiences? Our experiences can often fool us. For example, maybe you have been driving on a long road during the summer time. Far ahead it looks like the road is covered with water. Yet when you get there, the road is dry. Your eyes have fooled you. Sometimes people have vivid dreams and think it is really a wonderful religious experience, but their mind has fooled them. Maybe a sickness, a drug, or sleep deprivation has influenced their mind to invent the experience. You can't be sure if experiences are real or imaginary. In short, you cannot trust experiences.

Experiences, in and of themselves, really do not help you very often. If you have a vision of \$10,000,000, can you buy things with that money? No. It is not real. If you see an angel or hear God speaking, will that help you get into heaven? No. Those experiences may be exciting and enjoyable, but seeing and hearing things do not do anything for us.

And experiences are only temporary. Did you have wonderful experiences when you were young and going to school? I'm sure we all had wonderful experiences, but as we grow older, our memory clouds and those experiences fade away. In the same way, we may have a wonderful religious experience, but our memory of it may fade and we may not be able to have that experience again. If we are depending on that experience to help us, we may be stuck.

So, why do we want such religious experiences? Ultimately, it is because we do not take God at His Word. God's Word is not enough to satisfy us. We want some sort of validation or proof and we think that experiences will provide that. When Jesus rose from the dead, his disciples saw him alive, but one disciple, Thomas, was not there. The other disciples told him, "Jesus is alive. We have seen Him!" Thomas said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." (John 20:25) In the

same way, many Christians demand proof from God - a wonderful experience or some miracle - or they refuse to believe Him and His promises. That is lack of faith. That is sin.

Peter had a wonderful religious experience himself, but he said that we have something better. He wrote in our second lesson, "We have something more sure, the prophetic word." In other words, we all may not have wonderful religious experiences, but we all do have God's Word which is really better than any experience.

Why is it better? First of all, His words are better because they begin with God and not with us. Our lesson said, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Religious experiences may happen because we invent them or someone or something influences our minds. We are imperfect so experiences originating in our minds are not dependable. But God's Word is from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is perfect and therefore His words are perfect and dependable.

Secondly, His Words have power and can do things that religious experience cannot. Long ago, when God created the world, what did He use? Tools? Hands? No -- His powerful Word was enough. When He spoke, darkness and light separated and the world and everything in it came into being. As the well known hymn states it: "Thy strong Word did cleave the darkness; at Thy speaking it was done." When God speaks, things happen.

When God speaks in our lives, things happen, too. When God's word of Law judges you guilty, your experience doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if you "feel" good about yourself or that you think you are innocent. God's Law evaluates your life and proclaims your guilt and your deserved punishment.

However, God's Word also effects our release. Long ago, Jesus Christ died on the cross to forgive all sins. He rose from the dead to give life past the grave. After Jesus accomplished that, God now speaks and declares you to be holy. It doesn't matter how much sin you have done or how much guilt you are carrying. It doesn't matter if you feel holy or not. As the hymn says, "Thy strong Word bespeaks us righteous; bright with Thine own holiness." God's Word is effective. When God speaks and declares you to be holy because of Jesus death' and resurrection, then you are definitely holy before Him.

God's Word, when added to earthly elements, also accomplishes great things. Baptism seems like ordinary water. Yet when God's Word is joined to the water, then that water brings spiritual cleansing and forgiveness. It is not the amount of water used or the holiness of the water itself. God's Word alone accomplishes it.

A pastor is an ordinary man, a sinner like yourselves. Yet, when God's Word comes from his mouth and declares your sins to be forgiven here at church every Sunday, then your sins are forgiven. It is not the pastor's character, personality, personal holiness, or authority that forgives sins or His bold tone in declaring it. God's Word accomplishes it.

The Lord's Supper seems like ordinary bread and wine. Yet, when God's Word is joined with the bread and the wine, then Jesus' body and blood are present with the bread and wine to give His forgiveness and strength for your faith. It is not the pastor's power to make it so or His blessing of the elements that causes it to be so. God's Word accomplishes it.

Thirdly, His Word never fades away. Experiences come and go. We enjoy experiences and are excited at the moment they occur, and then we may forget them and they fade away. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away; but my words will never pass away." We have His Words preserved for us in a book, the Bible. We have His Words read and preached to us every week here in our church. His Word will support us and sustain us until we do experience God's glory ourselves -- either when we die or when Christ Himself comes again and God transforms us to be like Christ in His glory.

Peter encourages us by saying "you will do well to pay attention" to that Word. Paying attention to God's Word instead of seeking exciting experiences will help you a lot. Knowing and believing God's Word means you have all God's gifts -- forgiveness, a new heart/attitude, and life in heaven forever. You do not experience to validate that.

Does that mean all religious experiences are always bad or wrong? No. Jesus obviously intended for these three disciples to have this "mountain top" experience. If God allows you to have some great religious experience, that would be good and fine. It would not be wrong or a sin. But don't rely on those experiences as proof for your faith and necessary for salvation. When you do have some sort of experience, always compare that experience with God's Word. Many experiences, even if they feel good and right, are wrong and contrary to God's Word. God's Word is always correct. And don't despair if you have no experiences. God's Word in all of its various forms is sufficient.

We live in an age of uncertainty. People are searching for some experience that will give them a sense of certainty. And, while God has given His people from Peter, James, and John up to and including us many wonderful experiences, it is not through experience that He gives us certainty. "We have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention." The Word of God is a sure thing. Amen.