

The Ultimate Evidence of God

2 Peter 1:16-21 & Matthew 17:1-9

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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2 Peter 1:16-21 (NIV)

¹⁶We 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. ¹⁷For 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." ¹⁸We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. ¹⁹And 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. ²⁰Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. ²¹For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 17:1-9 (NIV)

¹After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ²There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

³Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. ⁴Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

⁵While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." ⁸When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The Ultimate Evidence of God

A Hungarian writer once wrote an amusing, but also very thoughtful dialogue which he imagined taking place between two babies in a mother's womb. Obviously they were twins. One twin asked the other: "Do you believe in life after delivery?"

The other replied, "Why, of course. There has to be something after delivery. Maybe we are here to prepare ourselves for what we will be later."

“Nonsense” said the first twin. “There is no life after delivery. What kind of life would that be?”

The second twin said, “I don’t know, but there will be more light than here. Maybe we will walk with our legs and eat from our mouths. Maybe we will have other senses that we can’t understand now.”

The first twin replied, “That is absurd. Walking is impossible. And eating with our mouths? Ridiculous! The umbilical cord supplies nutrition and everything we need. Life after delivery is to be logically excluded.”

The second insisted, “Well I think there is something and maybe it’s different than it is here. Maybe we won’t need this physical cord anymore.”

The first replied, “Nonsense. And moreover if there is life after delivery, then why has no one ever come back from there? Delivery is the end of life, and in the after-delivery there is nothing but darkness and silence and oblivion. It takes us nowhere.”

“Well, I don’t know,” said the second, “but certainly we will meet Mother and she will take care of us.”

The first replied, “Mother? You actually believe in Mother? That’s laughable. If Mother exists then where is She now?”

The second said, “She is all around us. We are surrounded by her. We are of Her. It is in Her that we live. Without Her this world would not and could not exist.”

Said the first: “Well I don’t see Her, so it is only logical that She doesn’t exist.”

To which the second replied, “Sometimes, when you’re in silence and you focus and you really listen, you can perceive Her presence, and you can hear Her loving voice, calling down from above.”

Interesting approach to a discussion of the life of faith, don’t you think? Is there a God? Is there life beyond this world? How can we know? Who can we trust to give us the answers? There are some things you need to know about the Christian faith.

FIRST OF ALL, NO ONE SAT DOWN AND THOUGHT UP OUR FAITH.

It is not the work of philosophers or holy seers, but of preachers, prophets, teachers, housewives, fishermen, and a host of common folk who were witnesses to events that they could not understand, but cherished in their hearts. The Christian faith is not reason, but revelation. God revealed Himself through encounters with ordinary people like Moses, David, Ruth, Daniel, the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, St. Paul and many other saints. They were imperfect vessels of God’s truth. Like unseeing

people describing an elephant, their testimonies differed. How does one describe the indescribable? If God could be expressed in a formula, a test tube or a trite expression, He could not be God.

Even when God revealed himself most perfectly of all in Jesus of Nazareth, it was left to ordinary people to describe what His coming meant. That is why the Gospels vary in describing the same events. These were eyewitness reports, not some well thought-out theology of religion.

Notice what Peter writes in his 2nd Epistle concerning an amazing incident which he experienced along with James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration: “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. 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.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with Him on the sacred mountain. 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.”

Can you imagine Peter’s feeling as he stood there on the Mount of Transfiguration with James and John as witnesses to one of the most dramatic scenes in history? When Moses ascended the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, he left behind his closest advisors. But when Jesus came into the presence of God, He took with Him these three humble fishermen. Can you put yourself into Simon Peter’s sandals for a moment? In a vicarious way, can you stand where he stood?

SIMON PETER DISCOVERED WHAT IT WAS TO STAND ON HOLY GROUND.

This is important for us to understand. We live in a so-called “secular” society. There is very little in life that is sacred to us. There is very little that is mysterious.

Alexander Pope once wrote satirically, “Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutor’d mind sees God in clouds, or hears Him in the wind.” As Pope is saying, we sophisticated secular people no longer see God in clouds or hear Him in the wind. We no longer see the movement of water in a pool as the special visitation of an angel as did the people beside the pool of Bethesda. We look to science, not religion, to answer most of our questions about physical reality.

And it is quite natural that we should. There have been benefits from the process of secularization. The quest for scientific truth has brought us a host of technological wonders. But as Alexander Pope is saying, something has also been lost. God has become an abstract concept for many of us rather than a very real present reality. Intellectually we believe in God, but His existence does not seem to have much relevance to our everyday lives. Few of us know what it means to stand on holy ground.

This is not to say that such experiences do not happen. Christian scholar J. B. Phillips lay in a hospital bed after a severe and prolonged operation “unable,” as he says, “to move a finger nor blink an eye-lid.” Yet he was fully conscious. Late one night he overheard a doctor murmur to the night-nurse, “I am afraid he won’t live till the morning.”

Phillips fell asleep. In his sleep, he dreamed that he was alone, depressed and miserable, trudging wearily down a dusty slope. Around him were the wrecks and refuse of human living. There were ruined houses, pools of stagnant water, cast-off shoes, rusty tin cans, worn-out tires and rubbish of every kind.

Suddenly, as he picked his way through this dreary mess, he looked up. Not far away on the other side of a little valley was a vista of indescribable beauty. He ran toward this glorious world. He noticed that only a tiny stream separated him from all that glory and loveliness. He ran toward a shining white bridge that had been built across the stream and was about to set foot on it, when a figure in white appeared before him.

This figure, whom Dr. Phillips described as supremely gentle, but absolutely authoritative, looked at him smiling, gently shook his head, and pointed him back to the miserable slope down which he had run. Phillips own words best conclude the story. He writes:

“I have never known such bitter disappointment, and although I turned obediently, I could not help bursting into tears. This passionate weeping must have awakened me, for the next thing that I remember was the figure of the night-nurse bending over me and saying, rather reproachfully: ‘What are you crying for? You’ve come through tonight — now you’re going to live!’

“But my heart was too full of the vision for me to make any reply. What could I say to someone who had not seen what I had seen?

“It is nearly forty years since the night of that dream, but I can only say that it remains as true and as clear to me today as it was then. Words are almost useless as a means to describe what I saw and felt, even though I have attempted to use them. I can only record my conviction that I saw reality that night, the bright sparkling fringe of the world that is eternal. The vision has never faded.”

Each of us will interpret Dr. Phillips’ “vision” in a different way. For some, it will be simply an easily explainable dream. For others, it will be a profound religious experience sent directly from God. Like the two babies in the womb, we have no way of measuring such things — no way of answering such questions absolutely. For Phillips it was of life-changing significance. It was no mere dream to him.

You should know that scholars debate the historicity of the scene on the Mount of Transfiguration. Was it a dream — or was it reality? You and I cannot know. We were not there. We have only Simon Peter’s testimony. He reports that he and his two fellow disciples beheld the majesty of Christ. They saw the Master in the company of Moses and Elijah. They heard a voice from Heaven saying, “This is my Son in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him.” Simon Peter knew what it was to stand on holy ground.

THE EXPERIENCE ON THE MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION CONFIRMED FOR SIMON PETER WHAT HE ALREADY BELIEVED ABOUT CHRIST.

It was Simon Peter who, in answer to Jesus' question at Caesarea Philippi, "Who do men say that I am?" affirmed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Simon Peter knew in his bones that this affirmation was true. Still, like us, there were some moments when it seemed truer than it did at others. After all, it was an astounding leap of faith to say that this humble Nazarene was the Son of the living God.

There is a story told about Robert Browning when he first met the poet, Shelley. People wanted to know what else happened on that particular occasion when the two met. Browning is said to have answered: "What else? I tell you I saw Shelley, and, of course, in view of that, everything else just faded from my mind."

That was the kind of feeling Simon Peter had in the presence of Jesus. Still, to claim Jesus as the long awaited Messiah required a very demanding leap of faith. So many others had come declaring to be the Christ. There were others who healed and performed great wonders. How could he know who was authentic and who was not?

And do not forget that the experience on the Mount of Transfiguration was not enough to keep Simon Peter from denying Christ when the time of testing came. It did not keep Peter from going back to his fishing nets after Christ's crucifixion. You and I should not feel guilty if at times we find our faith wavering. There is a veil over eternity that no human eye can penetrate.

It took the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to change Simon Peter from a reed to a rock. His life was a study in uneven growth. There were mountaintops, and there were valleys. We should not expect to move from sinners to saints in one fell swoop. Neither should we wait until we know and understand everything about Christ before we commit ourselves to His kingdom. That day will never come.

As J.S. Whale once put it, "The trouble so often is that we sit around the fire with a pipe in the mouth and feet on the mantelpiece and discuss theories of the Atonement instead of bowing down before the wounds of Christ."

On the Mount of Transfiguration Peter discovered what it was to stand on holy ground. He also had affirmed what he already believed about Jesus of Nazareth — that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

AND FINALLY SIMON PETER DISCOVERED ON THAT MOUNTAIN WHAT REAL MINISTRY IS ALL ABOUT.

Peter wanted to stay on the mountain. "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will pitch three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah."

Everyone loves a mountaintop experience, do we not? Why can't we just keep this moment forever? Simon Peter could not know that Christ's mission has far more to do with valleys than mountaintops. It has more to do with hanging on a cross between two thieves on a hill called Calvary than it does consulting with the venerable Moses and Elijah on a mountain. That is a truth that you and I need to learn.

This sanctuary is a sacred place to most of us. We meet God here. For some of us this is the most beautiful and meaningful hour in our week. We could pitch our tents and stay here all week long.

But we need to remember the time-honored story of the lady who happened in on a small Quaker congregation. They were sitting in silence. "When does the service begin?" she asked a man sitting near her. His answer: "As soon as the meeting is over."

Jesus' ministry was to the world of hurting humanity. Matthew tells us that as soon as He came off the mountain, Christ was confronted by a man who had an epileptic son. The boy's seizures were so sudden and severe that his family was afraid that they might be fatal to him. Could Jesus please help them?

Who among us likes to be confronted with such demands on our time and energy? "Let's pitch tents on the mountaintop and stay there. The valley is too demanding and too draining." But, my friends, the valley is what real ministry is all about.

Simon Peter stood with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. He knew what it was to stand for a moment on Holy Ground. He had affirmed there what he already believed about Jesus of Nazareth — that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. And he discovered what real ministry was all about — not the mountaintop, but the valley was where real ministry took place.

Two babies in a womb debate whether there is a Mother. You and I in the womb, which is planet earth, may debate whether there is a God. We can't offer any ironclad proof. The best we can do is to point to people who have encountered God in their everyday lives. Does their testimony ring true? Our faith hasn't been reasoned out for us. It has been revealed to us. Jesus Christ has walked among us. And He is still with us, still revealing Himself to us. Would you open your mind and your heart and allow Jesus to reveal Himself to you?

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