

Sunday Sermon: February 23, 2020

Texts for Transfiguration Sunday

Sermon Theme: What Are You Holding On To?

Gospel of the Lord: Matthew 17:1-9

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

⁴ Peter 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."

⁵ While 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!"

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

⁹ As 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."

Sermon Text: 2 Peter 1: 16-21

¹⁶ 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.

One of the ways that entertainment gets you to come back for more is the cliffhanger. Something really exciting happens right at the end of the chapter or the episode and you have to come back to see what happens.

Some of the very first cliffhangers had people hanging off a cliff. There are many shows or movies where the person is hanging onto a small root or branch, but you can see that it will not hold long. It will break and they will fall to their death. Their only hope is that the hero will come and rescue them before that small root breaks.

In our sermon text for today, the apostle Peter wants us to think about a very important question, "What are we holding on to?" We will see that Peter does not want us to be unsure and unsafe when it comes to our hope of heaven. Peter points out directly to Jesus as the only thing to hold on to.

Peter is probably the disciple that we get to know the most in the Bible. We don't just hear stories about what he did, we also get to see a little bit of his personality and who he is. The Bible tells us a lot about Peter. He was one of the three disciples who was in the inner circle called the Three. He was a leader. He often served as the spokesman for the all of the disciples. He was impulsive. He cut off Malchus' ear in the Garden of Gethsemane. But the thing that we learn the most about Peter is that he was a normal person who, at times, had a strong faith and other times where his faith is not quite so strong.

Right before the Transfiguration account in Matthew, we have two instances that clearly show that Peter had times when his faith was very strong and others where his faith was not so strong.

In the first account Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am." They replied with a number of answers. Then he asked, "Who do you say I am?" It was Peter who answered for the group, "You are the Christ the Son of the Living God." Jesus commended Peter for his faithful answer. He told Peter that the only way he could confess that was only if the Lord had revealed this truth to Peter and the disciples. This was the truth of salvation that they should hold onto which would save them and many others.

The second account shows that Peter also had times when he was not quite so strong in faith. At the end of his ministry, Jesus no longer spoke to his disciples in parables. Instead, there were many times when he would tell them plainly that he would go to Jerusalem and suffer and die to take away the sins of the world.

After one occasion Peter pulled Jesus aside and said to him, "Never Lord! This shall never happen to you." Do you remember what Jesus called Peter? He said to him, "Get behind me Satan."

The disciples and followers of Jesus were troubled when Jesus spoke about his suffering and death. It troubled them to think about their master and leader not only dying, but dying in a horrible way. They needed to be strengthened in his faith to understand that this is what Jesus had to do.

Peter needed some strengthening because he was not holding on to the firm foundation of faith in the Messiah and Savior. He was holding onto to a shriveled root that hung out of the side of a cliff because he wanted to hold on to the man, Jesus. He needed to be built up in faith so that he could believe in what Jesus would do for him and for the world and hold on to that.

We see Peter being strengthened at the Transfiguration. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, God spoke from heaven giving the command and the direction that all who heard should listen to his Son because all that his Son was doing on the earth, and would do on earth, to save sinful people, pleased him.

These disciples needed to be strengthened and that is what Jesus gives to them on the mountain of transfiguration. What a reminder that must have been to Peter, James and John as they were on that mountain with Jesus and they saw him shining with the glory of heaven. What a teaching moment as they listened as Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus about the plan of salvation that God had laid out through the prophets that was now coming to its conclusion as Jesus was getting ready to walk to Jerusalem to suffer and die.

What an amazing moment to hear the voice of God the Father put his stamp of approval on the suffering and death of his Son, **"This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well-pleased."**

Even though it was amazing, Peter, James and John didn't really understand what all of this meant. They were too starstruck and in awe of all of this. On their way from the mountain Jesus even tells them, **"Don't tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."**

Later on what happened on this mountain would make a difference. After Jesus was raised from the dead, what they had seen on the mountain would become a proof that Jesus really was the Savior of the world and that the message of salvation through Jesus, which the apostles preached, was the only thing to hold on to get to heaven.

In our sermon text for this morning from 2 Peter, Peter wants to remind us to hold on to the truth. 2 Peter was written towards the end of Peter's life. The church, the apostles and all Christians were facing increased persecution from Rome. In the light of many of the other apostles and the faithful who were dying for the faith, Peter also expects that he will die for the sake of the Gospel. Yet, in verse 15 he wants to make sure that the people will have something sure, that will lead to heaven, that they can hold on to. **"I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things."**

I think everybody wants the comfort of knowing there is something after death. If you look at any religion of the world from the most pagan to the most Christian, each of them has something that you are supposed to hang on to, to believe in, that will get you to the afterlife. It might be an action or activity, a magic spell or dance, a burial right or tradition, or even Jesus.

Everyone knows there is a right and wrong. Everyone knows that there is someone that they are answerable to. This knowledge is called the natural knowledge of God.

We know that there is right and wrong in the world. We think we can find the answer to heaven by finding out how much good we must do and how much bad we can get away with. In searching for an answer we come back to two questions: Am I good enough? Have I sinned too much?

People have come up with many answers to try to hold on to. Maybe you are familiar with some of these thoughts about heaven. Maybe you might even have thought about holding on to these things yourself.

- I believe that as long as I continue to do good God will let me into heaven.
- I believe that all religions are really talking about the same God so just follow something.
- I believe that all people will eventually end up in heaven.
- I believe my ancestors will guide me to what is right and good.
- I believe that we will do it over again and again until we get it right.
- I believe that there are many religious books with many religious ideas. The trick is knowing a little about each one.
- I believe that Jesus wasn't a real person, Jesus was really an idea to make us better people.

- I believe that we don't need to get caught up in the doctrines of the Bible because God wants us to be happy and as long as I am searching for my truth and my happiness God will be Ok with that.
- I believe that if I am passing out positivity and making others life better that God will make my life better and better too.
- I believe that God will give back to me for all the good I do on earth.

These are all religious philosophies or ideas that are trying to answer the question of what will get us to heaven, but none of these teachings are worth holding on to. They are like the dried, cracked root that the person is holding onto as they dangle over the edge of the cliff. That dead twig is a bad thing to hope and trust in because it will not hold. It will give way and they will fall.

Peter says that there is only one truth that we should held on to. It is a truth that they themselves believed and held on to. This truth was not a story they made up to entertain people. It was not something they added to and embellished to make Jesus sound more exciting and amazing. They were eyewitness of what Jesus did and taught and they shared that message with others. They simply told what Jesus said and how he died and rose again. In doing this they shared the Savior and how he forgave us and gave us heaven.

If we were hanging from the cliff we want as much safety as possible. We would want the rope, the safety harness, the net below us, and the helicopter above. Most of all we want the rescuer holding onto us to keep us safe.

Man may come up with all sorts of things to hang onto. The Word of God does teach that we need to hold on to something. It does teach that we need to be rescued. But none of the earthly ways will rescue us. But it does not say that we rescue ourselves or that there are many ways to be rescued. There is only one rescuer who takes hold of us and saves us. God the Father's voice resounded from heaven with the message of this Savior. **This is my Son whom I love with him I am well-pleased, Listen to him.**

Jesus reached out to us, pulling us to himself when he went to the cross. By his sacrifice he removed our sin and pulled us from the cliff that leads to death and hell. The Bible says that Jesus reached into the grave and brought us out to live a new life in him.

What are you holding on to? God wants to be sure that we are always holding on to the sure truth which leads to salvation. To do that he has given us his pure Word to guide us in that truth. Peter tells us to pay attention to the Word that God has given to us. Just as God says listen to him, we have the Jesus own words in the Gospel to listen to. **The Bible never had it origins in the mind of man,** the Bible was not written because a group of men wanted to write the best novel of all time. The Bible was written because God wanted us to have the truth of Jesus as our Savior. God also made sure that truth was preserved. **Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.** God sent his Holy Spirit to these men to guide them with the thoughts and the words to right so that we would have the truth to hold on to.

The world can only offer us little sticks and twigs to hold onto. The only truth that truly leads to heaven is Jesus. God gives us a Savior who has already rescued us from sin, death and the devil. This Savior has given us the safety and security of heaven. This is a Savior to hold on to. Amen