



“MOVING AND PROVING”

SCRIPTURE: 2 PETER 1: 16-21

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, February 19, 2023, Transfiguration Sunday

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

2 Peter 1:16-21

1:16 For 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.

1:17 For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

1:18 We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

1:19 So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. 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.

1:20 First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation,

1:21 because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

The Word of the LORD.

ALL: THANKS BE TO GOD.

There are few things more challenging to deal with than a disappointed toddler. I can remember those days well of high level negotiations over things like nap time, brushing teeth, and meal time. The best strategy was to make it a game—to be playful and give your toddler choices.

“Do you want to read this book or this book before you go to sleep?” The hope is that the choice about the books will be a distraction so that said toddler forgets to argue about going to bed.

(put up cover image of Benny’s Had Enough–full screen in sanctuary; split screen for live stream)

A book that seemed to always work, was “Benny’s Had Enough” by Barbro Lundgren, a Swedish author, illustrated by Olof Landstrom, a Finish born artist who lives in Sweden.

There was something enchanting about this book for my kids and for me, too. It’s the story of a frustrated little pig who sets out to see if he can find a better place for him and his stuffed animal little piggy after his mother tries to put Little Piggy in the washing machine.

I pretty much have the book memorized, I read it so many times. And my kids had little hand motions we did at certain times. I had a certain voice I read it in that I can’t not use when I read it.

(take down cover image of Benny’s Had Enough)

(Might read part of the book?)

The lectionary gave us a choice today about which book to read on this Transfiguration Sunday. The fan favorite on this Sunday is always the gospel account of the transfiguration. All the dazzling imagery of the story of Jesus transfigured on that mountain–and the voice of God speaking from the heaven’s, Moses and Elijah having a face to face conversation with Jesus. What’s not to love about the story? There are even confused disciples for us to relate to as they react to this epiphany of Jesus’ divinity.

With a story like that, it’s no wonder this passage from Peter always takes a back seat. Afterall, 2 Peter is a grown up book about a frustrated somebody. We don’t even know who wrote it–it was probably written well after Peter was dead. And it was written by someone who can sound a little like Benny–frustrated, he’s had enough! His own people, his own faith family, not doing it right, not getting it right.

The author of this letter wasn’t just frustrated. He was worried. And he wanted to bring a strong message–that’s why he used Peter’s name and reputation. He was seeing some things happening in those early days of the Jesus following movement that really concerned

him. He was seeing people leave behind ethics, virtue, the practice of virtue and justifying themselves by using Paul's letters as license to depend on the grace of baptism without tending to the praxis, the ethic of being a Jesus follower.

This author has challenges coming from all sides—the ones who have forgotten the centrality of a Jesus-centered way of life. And those who are accusing this emerging faith to be a “fake religion” because the second coming of Christ had not happened yet. That's another reason Peter was a great pseudonym. Peter had the trump card of first hand experience with Jesus—and namely, first hand experience with the transfiguration itself.

This author warns his audience that false teachers are within the Jesus-following faith—the erosion of the integrity of the faith is an inside job in other words.

By the time this book was written, Paul letters were being widely circulated and regarded as “scripture.” Now remember this was pre-Bible, pre-Roman Empire cooptation of Christianity. This is pre-orthodoxy, pre-church hierarchy. The architecture of this Jesus following was not yet in place for it to be an organized and institutionalized religion.

We get a window into the chaos there was just a generation after Jesus's execution. We get a window into how different interpretations of sacred texts were being viewed as problematic by people like this author. The seeds of orthodoxy were already being planted. The author is gripped in concern about who will be the arbiter of how it grows and gets ingested in God's people.

Now it's hard for us to get our imaginations stretched far enough to realize that this author was not a mouthpiece of Empire, not an apologist for the Christian orthodoxy that we have inherited, but someone increasingly uncomfortable with the ways some of his siblings in the faith were inching into a way of life that bought into the social stratification of the time, that participated in the unjust economies of the time, that was missing the point of what Jesus was all about when it came to an ethic of justice and equity and mercy.

It is really hard for contemporary Christians to sync up with what this author was truly frustrated about because it is really hard for us contemporary Christians to accept that scripture was not written from the perspective of the oppressor class. The prophets of Hebrew scripture, the teachings of the Torah, and the writings that we know as the Christian gospel were written from the margins, by the oppressed, not the oppressor.

This book we know as the Bible is a liberation text.

It is a grotesque distortion that it was so long ago co-opted by Empire that it is such an effective tool of oppression and exploitation and shaming.

The author of 2 Peter was frustrated about the beginnings of this co-optation. He was looking for traction, he was looking for a way to call people back to the heart of Jesus' power to change the world. He was also looking for some mechanism of accountability. And Jesus' second coming was his tool of choice. ("Bright morning star" is a reference to the second coming //Revelation)

The generation that had expected the second coming had died. The teachings of the second coming had faded in emphasis. And that opened up the door for teachings that were void of that accountability—that deemphasized the judgment of God and the second coming of Christ. This authorized social stratification and immoral practices in business. It's hard for us to not hear this being about sexual immorality—but it is really about justice in the ways we move socially and economically, it is about the way we treat each other.

The Roman Empire decided hell was a much more effective tool of exploitation and extraction than the second coming. Hell is a very compelling way to encourage compliance and sacrificial financial giving. I understand the temptation. There has not been a stewardship season yet when I didn't spend a few minutes musing about how handy the threat of hell truly is for fundraising!

But that's not where the author of 2 Peter goes, even though he uses some really strong language about consequences in chapter 2.

And hell wasn't something Jesus talked about—it wasn't the heart of his teaching by any means. He actually dismantled many social constructs based on punishment and social shaming—he lifted up the beautiful elegance of Torah's emphasis on right relationship. The point of living by Torah was not to achieve perfection or superiority, but to find balance and equanimity.

Jesus wasn't here to threaten us, he was here to transform us—away from the ways we use and abuse each other, toward a way of life that honors the humanity and dignity of all in the service of true compassion and true justice and true healing.

When 2 Peter was written, there was a watering down of the radical nature of Jesus' life underway. In the earliest circles of Jesus followers women were leaders, social hierarchies were collapsed. The earliest Jesus following communities had a radical social ethic of shared resources and social equality. Governmental and religious leaders were not gods—they were human beings in need of God's love just like the rest of us—and Jesus called them

to be accountable to the people they impacted the most with their policies and procedures and practices.

The author of 2 Peter may well have seen his contemporaries beginning to use Paul's letters as a way to authorize misogyny—something that is a direct contradiction of Jesus' ministry.

The author of 2 Peter may have seen his contemporaries attending social gatherings that exploited children and women sexually and that reveled in social hierarchies—practices that Jesus called out as a violation of a person's humanity. He called these things out as a prophetic Jew and as a relentless critic of the hoarding of financial resources.

The author of 2 Peter may have seen his contemporaries using Paul's letters to consecrate the oppression of foreigners, the impoverished, and those with disabilities. He may have seen his contemporaries turn a blind eye toward corruption or even participating in corruption because they told themselves things like “business is business” and “all is fair in the world of commerce.” The sanctioning of and participation in unjust economies were two things Jesus consistently condemned. Jesus' biggest radical shifts for his followers' lives were around resources and economic justice. He was not ambiguous at all on this point.

There is so much more in scripture about economic justice than there is about sexuality or embodied normativity or hierarchy. But look at how poorly Christians have delivered on economic justice and how strongly Christians have been the enforcers of heterosexual normativity and body shaming.

This is the kind of stuff that the author of 2 Peter was worried about—the co-optation of Jesus' identity and Jesus ministry and Jesus' divinity to justify the very harmful and dehumanizing systems and structures and practices that Jesus had come to disrupt. The author of 2 Peter was onto something—and unfortunately, the author's writing was co-opted by Empire when scripture was canonized and became a tool of Empire, conquest, colonization, and oppression.

If we can stretch our imaginations enough to read this text not as a text about orthodoxy, but as a text about Jesus' non-conformity to the values of Empire, then we can start to feel the urgency that this author felt about making sure people paid attention to Jesus and the fact that he will come again—so seeing Jesus clearly matters—and Jesus is coming back to check on how we're doing with that assignment. The transfiguration is the historical basis of the second coming.

False teachers were denying the moral and economic impact of the gospel.

The way we move, Grace Covenant, is the way we prove our devotion to Jesus' way of living in this world. To move in sync with Jesus, we have to get the Empire's co-optation of Jesus' teachings out of our psyches. That means de-programming that part of how we have been formed in our faith, and meeting Jesus anew in our life together.

What is our first hand experience of Jesus? How is he alive and well here? What do we know of him? What do we learn about him in the ways we move in this world as a community?

For the author of 2 Peter there is a desperation to these questions. Especially to the question of how Jesus is reflected in how a community moves. If you keep reading, you will find he does not mince words. Judgment will come. Jesus didn't live, die and rise for us to use his name to justify evil.

But to truly hear the warning, we have to reframe the narratives we have been given by Empire about what evil actually is. We have to disentangle ourselves from the co-optation and live into the truth that can really set us free—truly free in a way that doesn't do harm, in a way that doesn't normalize superiority and idolatry and injustice and accumulation.

The author of 2 Peter is throwing a theological temper tantrum. But it's not about doctrine or dogma. It's about the way we move and prove. Following the Jesus that walked this earth means living not by the rules of commerce and hierarchy but by the promise of right relationship and humility.

He so wants us to not lose touch with the ethical and moral implications of following Jesus that his tantrum is a warning—this delay in Jesus' return won't last forever. 2000 years for us is just a blink of God's eyes. It will happen like a thief in the night, and what will Jesus find about the ways we treat each other and the earth we call home? What kind of community will he find?

2 Peter could be called "Peter's Had Enough!" And just like the frustrated young pig in "Benny's Had Enough", Peter is looking for a way back to the home he knows he needs to truly be free.

Benny had his come to Jesus moment when he realized he had mistakenly seen home as a place of scarcity and lots of rules that kept him from enjoying life. (maybe read some of Benny at the end—about realizing he already had what he wanted and needed).

Benny realized that there was enough for him and that abundant love had been there all along. And that he and Little Piggy didn't need to run away, they needed to go home.

And that's really what the author of 2 Peter is trying to say in the midst of his temper tantrum and desperation—Jesus showed you abundance, Jesus showed you justice and showed you joy, Jesus showed you what it means to move in the rhythms of God's best hopes for us. So get back home to the Jesus that showed us the way, before he comes back and has to see how far off the path we have strayed.

It's a strange comfort, isn't it, to know that God actually believes we can do this! That God believes we are capable of co-creating a world of justice and mercy and love. So, let's keep moving and proving together. May the Lenten journey ahead show us the way back home to the love sets us free.

Thanks be to God.