

“The Testimony of Eyewitnesses”

Liturgical Date: Transfiguration (A)

Primary Text: 2 Peter 1:16-21

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Transfiguration of our Lord, is the Epistle Lesson from 2 Peter 1. The title of the sermon is “The Testimony of Eyewitnesses” as we confess that “holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” in knowing that the Bible, the Word of God, is true.

Today in the Gospel Lesson we heard about the Transfiguration of Jesus. This marks the culmination of the season Epiphany where the readings focused on Jesus revealing who He is: the only begotten Son of God, the Christ-the Messiah, the one who will give His life as the atonement for the sins of the world. On the Mount of Transfiguration Peter, James, and John witness an amazing event where the appearance of Jesus is transformed to be a bright shining light as they have never seen before. Moses and Elijah appear, speaking for the Law and the Prophets and finally the voice of the Father affirms the identity of Jesus, *“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him.”*

The Epistle Lesson is very much connected to the Transfiguration. Jesus tells the witnesses of the Transfiguration something interesting in verse 9 of Matthew 17. He instructs them as He sometimes did to not share information at the present time, *“Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.”* St. Peter is writing his second Epistle after the death and resurrection of Jesus as the Gospel is going forth around the world and now he boldly proclaims what he witnessed that day. He tells

us what he witnessed that day on the “holy mount” including the voice of the God that verified the identity of Jesus.

There is no doubt in Peter’s mind. But what about today? Those that doubt the reliability of the Bible often speak loudly and boldly, questioning the very Word of God. In 2005 a man named Bobby Henderson sent a letter to the Kansas State Board of Education claiming that a divine being called the “Flying Spaghetti Monster” created the universe. The letter was a satirical attempt to discredit Christian belief by essentially saying there is as much evidence for the reliability of the Bible as there is for this supposed pasta creature. This spawned a movement where a “religion” was actually created based out of this, its followers known as “Pastafarians”. True Story. Then of course you have prominent atheists like Richard Dawkins and Bill Maher that spew their rhetoric diminishing and ridiculing the Scripture. We have seen a rash of people who claim, even a best selling Christian author and MVP quarterback, who claim they once believed but now no longer do. Even more disturbing are those within the visible church that question the reliability of the Scripture-or at least portions of it. No doubt you have heard some of these charges from friends, family, and co-workers that “You cannot trust the Bible. It has many errors. The Bible is full of contradictions.”

As Bible-believing Christians we believe that the Bible is the inspired (spoken by God), inerrant (without error), infallible (incapable of error) Word of God. Our Lutheran Confessions make it clear that we believe that the Bible is a divinely inspired book, the only one actually. The Formula of Concord, Epitome in the Book of Concord begins, “*We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and norm according to which all teachings,*

*together with all teachers, should be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament **alone.***”

The Bible itself makes it very clear that it is the inspired Word of God. 2 Timothy 3:16, “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.*” Jesus said in St. John 17:17, “*Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth*”, and in St. Matthew 24:35 “*Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.*” The Bible (especially in the Old Testament) says about 2,000 times, “*Thus saith the Lord*” or a variation of it. Then of course in our Epistle for today St. Peter writes, “*For the prophecy that came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.*” The Scripture boldly claims that is not the work of mere fallible human authors, but given to the God-chosen authors as the perfect Word of God by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

This is no small thing. Because as Christians who say, “the Bible says” we have no leg to stand on if the Scripture is not true. That is why I want you to know today that you can believe and trust this book (hold up Bible). I have preached a similar message to this before, but I believe we need to hear it regularly.

OK Pastor, but everything you have said comes from the Bible itself. If I know someone who claims that the Bible is not reliable then is there external evidence to show that is in fact reliable? Yes, there is. And this sermon could easily turn into a series-and I probably will have a series on the topic one day, but today in giving one sermon I want to focus largely on one specific aspect relating to evidence and testimony of witnesses.

The Lutheran Hour put together a program several years ago that was very well done called "*The Bible on Trial*." In the video an attorney hosts in a courtroom setting the case for the Bible's accuracy. Perhaps some of you enjoy watching police or courtroom drama type TV shows or those programs about true crime and how the cases were solved. I have always found these types of programs interesting. From a young age I loved Scooby Doo because they were solving a mystery and catching the bad guys. My hours to watch TV are limited, but I do enjoy the police drama *Blue Bloods* and I have very sad that *Lt. Joe Kenda Homicide Hunter* has ended as I think I have seen every episode in its 8 seasons. Why do I, and perhaps you, like programs like this. One aspect is the idea of justice being served and another is the intrigue of when something terrible happens and then detectives piece together the case to find out the truth of what happened. The prosecutors know that they don't have a chance at winning a case unless there are two things: evidence and reliable witnesses.

What makes Christianity different than mythological religions? Put simply, Christianity is rooted in historical evidence and has reliable witnesses. Unlike the ridiculous "Flying Spaghetti Monster" deity and its religious texts, Christianity has plenty of evidence. Peter draws this distinction in verse 16 saying "*For we have not followed cunningly devised fables*". People like to point to apparent contradictions in the Bible, most of which are rather easily debunked, but think about this: The Bible is not one book that descended from heaven on one day. It is actually a collection of 66 books, written over a 1500 year period, by about 40 different human authors, in three languages. If you gathered primary sources for anything else involving such a diversity and time span you would never get the amazing consistency that the Bible has. The Bible gives us God's plan of

salvation, centered in Jesus Christ, preaches Law and Gospel, and gives accurate history and science in an amazingly consistent way. Furthermore, the Bible has more manuscripts than any other religion or any other document from the ancient world for that matter. How many do you think there are? For the New Testament alone over 24,000 including fragments and almost 6,000 lengthy manuscripts! The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947, contained manuscripts of all the Old Testament books except Esther that were dated 1,000 years before what we had prior to this discover. And guess what, almost a complete match with nothing that comprised any significant doctrine. When was the last time that you heard anyone question the existence of Julius Cesar? Probably never. But we only have 10 manuscripts referencing him and they are dated 1,000 years after he lived? Other works of antiquity are similar. Put simply that even in an academic sense, the Bible is the most reliable record of the ancient world-religious or secular that is in existence.

Now back to the title of the sermon and our example of the importance of witness testimony. In a solid court case you have to have witnesses-not just any witnesses, but good reliable witnesses. Many a prosecution's case has fallen apart because the witnesses they produced had their credibility demolished on the stand by a skilled defense attorney. If a witness can't exactly remember what they saw or gives conflicting testimony the case falls apart. If the credibility of the witness, say they a criminal being offered a reduced sentence for their testimony, can be damaged the jury may not believe them. If the witness has a vendetta against the accused, then the objectivity of what they say may be doubted. In short good, honest, hard-working, and level-headed witnesses are the best kind.

What of the Biblical authors? They were a diverse group that included scholars, professionals, military leaders, kings, farmers, and fisherman. This is a great cross-section of people and they had little motivation to not tell the truth. In fact, not only did they gain little by telling the truth they often suffered greatly for it. In a human court a witness who testifies against an organized crime gang knowing that their life may now be in danger is a highly believable witness. And those who spoke the truth of God were unpopular and persecuted for boldly speaking. And there was no “Witness Protection Program” for them. Almost all of the disciples, including Peter, were martyred for refusing to back down from what they knew was true. If the charge is that this was some type of conspiracy created by later followers of Jesus for personal gain the life and death of the Biblical authors refutes that illogical assertion.

The authors of the New Testament were either eyewitnesses of the events described such as Matthew, John, and Peter or close associates of the eyewitnesses such as Paul, Mark, and Luke. Furthermore these witnesses also name many others such as the women who found the tomb empty, who were living at the time, who could confirm what they said was true. Peter proclaims this is our reading for today. He and others were eyewitnesses he says in verse 17. He was there at the Transfiguration and other events of Jesus’ ministry. This was not hearsay. He was there. He saw it. He heard it. He experienced it. This was as he says in verse 19, “a more sure word of prophecy.” It was not a private interpretation of events he states in verse 20. All the words that he and the other Biblical authors wrote were not things they made up, but were inspired by God the Holy Spirit.

There is also another type of witness that is coveted in legal cases. This witness is one who is actually opposed to the person on trial, but speaks

the truth about what they saw anyway. If there is a group of people arrested for assaulting a person and one of the group turns on the others and testifies against them because he has cut a deal for a reduced sentence then this testimony can be useful but it would be in the back of the jury's minds that this person may be making things up to save their own skin. But what if you had a witness of the attack that hated the person that was assaulted? They could not stand the person and didn't feel any sympathy for them, but they are a witness for the prosecution telling truthfully what they saw even though they had no love for the victim. That would be a powerful witness would it not? Do we have anything like this relating to the Bible?

Actually we do. The Romans intensely persecuted Christians for a long period of time. They largely rejected the faith of Christianity and saw them as troublemakers who would not go along with the prevailing norms of Roman society. Yet we have Roman historians such as Suetonius, Tacitus, and Josephus who in their writing confirm many of the events that are described in the Bible.

So if this were a legal case it is a slam-dunk. You have plenty of evidence through the manuscripts and a large number of eyewitnesses from a diverse set of backgrounds who stand to gain nothing material from making anything up as well as people those eyewitnesses shared information with. The evidence speaks clearly that the Bible is indeed an extremely reliable historical document. Decades ago a journalist with the *Chicago Tribune* who was an atheist did research and discovered the same thing. That journalist was named Lee Strobel and his journey was made into a book a movie *The Case for Christ* a few years ago

But as we Christians know, faith is not simply an intellectual exercise. You can have all the evidence and connect all the dots in a logical and

academic way, but this does equal saving faith. This is the work of God transforming the hearts and minds of lost sinners. Just because the Bible is reliable does not in itself make it inspired and inerrant. In the magazine published by Concordia Theological Seminary it contained a profound quote that I read a couple of years ago. Speaking of the Bible it read, *“It is not the Word of God because the Church says so; but that the Word of God might be spoken therefore the Church comes into being. The Church does not make the Word, but is made by the Word.”* The Body of Christ, His people—the Church is a creation of the Word of God.

The Bible is not valuable simply because it is reliable historical document, but because of what it proclaims and creates. God used human beings to record His Holy Word, but the true author of the Scripture is God Himself. St. Peter asserts that he is an eyewitness to the Transfiguration, but what ultimately makes the words that he writes true is not Peter, but because he and *“holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”* And it was the witnesses were key in convincing Peter at the Transfiguration to the true identity of Jesus. Not only is the appearance of Jesus radically changed in a bright shining way on the Mount of Transfiguration, but Peter sees the witnesses of Moses and Elijah confirming that Jesus is the Messiah who fulfills the Old Testament. And he hears the voice of God of the Father witnessing to the fact that this is indeed His Son whom he should listen to and believe.

The evidence, in an academic sense, clearly confirms that the Bible should be taken seriously. But as St. Paul writes under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is 2 Corinthians 4:13, *“We have the same spirit of faith in keeping what is written, I believed therefore I have spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak.”* As verse 19 of the 2 Peter 1 said this Word is *“a light*

that shineth in a dark place.” The message of the Bible is Jesus. It is His work of redemption for a lost and fallen creation. Without saving faith in the message of the Bible, one misses the whole point of the Scripture. If this message is not proclaimed it has no real value. The Bible makes us “wise unto salvation” (2 Timothy 3:15) through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

So trust it. Believe it. Live it. Share it. Speak it. Amen.