

EYEWITNESSES

Last Sunday of Epiphany, Year A: 2 Peter 1:16-21 Rainey Gamble Dankel
Psalm 99 February 25, 2017
Matthew 17:1-9 Trinity Church

Key Passages: *We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:18)*

While [Peter] was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him." (Matthew 17:6)

I have a friend who comes from a long line of storytellers. Whenever he and his family gather, they enjoy telling stories about the family, what we in the South call "tall tales." Stories that are funny, or tragic, and usually both. Stories that have been handed down over generations.

Every now and then a cousin or someone who hasn't been with the family for a while will be part of a gathering. As the stories start, this person will interject, "Stop! That's not the way it happened," and then tries to correct the record. My friend's reaction to this occurrence is to mutter, "There's nothing like an eye-witness to ruin a good story."

Today is the last Sunday in Epiphany, the end of the cycle that celebrates the earthly ministry of Jesus. Each year we read one of the accounts of the Transfiguration (found in all three Synoptic gospels.) Today we read Matthew's version. Three disciples go with Jesus up a mountain. There they experience a vision of Jesus in blazing glory, with Moses and Elijah appearing with him. Coming just after Jesus predicts his death, it is a prefiguring of his glorification within the context of suffering.

Today's first reading brings this story slightly closer to us. The letter known as Second Peter is probably the last written part of the New Testament. Though it is attributed to the apostle Peter, it represents the work of an anonymous writer associated with the traditions of Peter. (This was common in ancient times and not considered dishonest.) It probably dates from around 130 AD, several generations after the life of Jesus and his disciples.

Part of the writer's claim to authenticity rests on Peter's being an eyewitness to Jesus in glory and hearing the voice affirming, "This is my Son." The writer identifies with Peter's experience, as he or she imaginatively recreates that moment. And then draws in the readers all these generations later, claiming

that authenticity in interpreting Scripture comes not from individual activity, but through the inspiration of Holy Spirit. Thus, words that we believe are divinely inspired are continuously inspired in their interpretation.

Perhaps this is both encouraging and challenging to you. We post-Enlightenment people tend to look for historical accuracy and rely on our intelligence to sort out interpretations of events and writings. And certainly our minds are in play when we read and interpret Scripture. This was a major force behind the Protestant Reformation.

But when we rely too much on our own personal interpretation, we may find ourselves a bit at sea, looking for anchors to our faith. The stories may seem far from our own stories. And if we feel that we haven't had the personal experiences described in the traditional stories, then we begin to despair of attaining a living and growing faith. The encouragement I draw from 2 Peter is the idea of the Holy Spirit as helping to convey authenticity to us across the generations. The writer speaks of the people who were moved by the Holy Spirit to speak from God. We are not on our own, we who are so many generations removed from the earthly life of Jesus. We are in the company of faithful people of every generation who keep the stories alive as God continues to inspire us, literally to "breathe through us."

The second letter of Peter is written to early Christians who, like us, have heard the good news of Jesus, of God's undying love for us. Like them, we are trying to make sense of this message in the language of our own cultures. And, perhaps like them, we are facing cultures that do not trust or value this good news.

Peter's hearers, likely residents of Asia Minor (Turkey), knew that Christ stands over against Hellenistic culture, with its emphasis on secret knowledge for the highly educated. And, even more challenging, they were part of the Roman Empire that required worship of the Emperor as a god. They knew that any colonist or citizen who refused to swear such allegiance, anyone who publicly claimed the authority of God in Christ over the Emperor, could be tortured or executed.

Most of the Christians of our time do not face such persecution. (Although there are dismaying examples of this in parts of the world today, and we need to pay attention to these tragedies.) But perhaps many of us have felt that the basic teaching of Jesus' life and indeed of the Bible as a whole, do not square with many of the values of the cultures in which we live, and so experience a certain discomfort in what is supposed to be good news. And attempts to escape the discomfort by blurring these differences often take us far from the ideas of peace and justice that are central to our faith.

The encouragement from our second reading today is that we are not on our own trying to make sense of Jesus and his messages. We are part of a continuing community that has experienced and preserved the stories of the Scriptures, that represents a faith kept alive in each generation. The writer encourages us: “You would do well to be attentive to [this message] as to a lamp shining in a dark place.” We experience this enlightenment as we participate in the community which lives the message. The communities—the church—are the continuing witnesses, the continuing memory that draws us ever deeper into God’s love for us.

This collective memory is crucial to our development as people of faith. That is why Bible studies, and Inquirers’ Classes, and Christian Education forums, and book groups, and choirs, and talking circles, and experiences as literacy volunteers, and, yes, coffee hours, are important. These are ways in which we can connect with each other. The deeper our relationships with each other, the greater trust we experience in learning from each other, in having our consciences stirred, in having our imaginations expanded. We come together, not to testify to our competence, but to witness to God’s power working among us.

The stories we share through church give us a sense of our identity. They help us know who and whose we are, part of a community in which together we try to understand what it means to be deeply loved by God and how we can experience that love, even in the midst of challenging and divisive circumstances. It gives both comfort and urgency to our faith to be involved in this work.

James Agee was an American novelist, poet, screenwriter, and film critic in the first half of the twentieth century. His autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family*, is a poignant portrayal of loss and grief. A fragment of that work was set to music by Samuel Barber, as “Knoxville: Summer of 1915,” a work for soprano soloist and orchestra. It’s a nostalgic recollection of a young boy and his family on a summer evening. Lying on quilts at the end of the day, he looks at the stars and listens to the soft voices around him. He asks God to bless these people who, he says “quietly treat me as one familiar and well-beloved in that home.” And then he adds these soulful words: “but [they] will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.”

That is our basic search as human beings, is it not? To discover who we are. I am not trying to sentimentalize or minimize this serious struggle, so often a confusing set of twists and turns. I simply want to lift up the potential and power of being part of a faithful community as offering some anchoring moments in that struggle. I acknowledge the great harm done, the tragic ways in which we as church get it wrong, when we turn the inclusive and forgiving love of God into a perverted way of preserving our own privilege, prejudices,

and misjudgments. Nevertheless, this is a place that we believe God has chosen to be present to us, to help us discover this love and its power to heal.

As we stand on the threshold of Lent, we are entering a time of the church year when we are encouraged to find ways to draw closer to God. There will be many activities and opportunities on offer here at Trinity. Here is one that may not have occurred to you to be part of this Lenten discipline. Next Saturday we are holding a workshop entitled “Embracing Difference in Divisive Times.” The frame for this day is to see how we approach these challenges as people of faith, as people who trust God’s good news of reconciling love. We will have opportunities to interrogate assumptions and practices that perpetuate oppression and to find ways of thinking and interacting that can provide a new way forward. I don’t promise you comfort on that day. I promise you the possibility of encounters with others who may have very different experiences and analyses from yours, and who share with you a desire to understand what God is up to in trying to build a beloved community. Everyone is welcome on that day.

Let me specific about how important these conversations are. My mother had dementia for the last several years of her life. She moved into the memory care part of the senior living community to which she and my father had moved many years earlier. Eventually she was in the health care center after a broken hip left her unable to walk. My father went every day, usually twice, to sit with her while she ate a few bites of lunch or supper. Other friends, particularly from their church, would visit regularly. And we children did our best to stay in touch, especially my sister who lived in a neighboring city.

Over these years, I believe we became Mother’s memory. We would tell her about current activities and often made references to past stories, especially family memories. Mother was part of the continuing community around her. We didn’t challenge her to try to remember our names or any parts of the stories. We wanted her to feel comfortable with our presence and to experience the surrounding of love that she had always provided to us as we were growing up. I believe these connections nurtured her through those years and were signs of God’s grace for her last days.

May this time of Lent be for you a confirmation of our collective memory and affirmation of God’s love for us. Together may we be attentive, as the writer of Second Peter urges us, to the message of “a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”