An Eyewitness Account

2 PETER 1:16-21 (NRSVUE) ***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.*** ***[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."*** ***[18]We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.*** ***[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.*** ***[20]First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation,*** ***[21]because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.***
[THE WORD OF GOD FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD…]

Many biblical passages follow a structured format—like our poetry. Sonnets are recognized by a specific format: fourteen lines, each with ten syllables. Limericks have a recognizable rhythm. Acrostics and Haiku… each is recognized by its form and style.

Many of the prophetic writings had specific formats, including poetry. That was important in an oral society in which most people could neither read nor write. If I whisper a story to Dean, and he whispers it to Bethany, and she to Bill… By the time it got back to Bill Lacy it probably won't be at all like the story I shared with Dean. But, if I teach Dean a poem, that same person-to-person sharing likely will produce a recitation very close, if not precisely, as I taught it to Dean. Form and structure ensure the preservation of the content.

Today's reading from II Peter follows a recognizable format. It's a letter; an epistle. Letters still follow regular forms, especially in the business world. Aunt Martha's letters always look the same.

Paul's letters predictably contained the signature first ***("Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ")***, followed by an address ***("To the churches of Galatia,")*** a greeting ***("Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,)*** followed by thanksgiving or praise, the message, a closing greeting, and a farewell.[1] II Peter follows a format typical of 1st century letters.

It's a personal letter, apparently a "testament," a common Jewish writing in which the implied author is presented as near death and giving a final message to his people. The message usually included ethical exhortations and predictions of things to come. Testaments were pseudepigraphal (written under an assumed name) and were understood and accepted as such by their readers.

This letter likely was written by one of Peter's disciples in Rome, about 30 years after Peter's death. Its purpose is to recall and invoke Peter's teaching to

[1] Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 736). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

confront a situation of false teaching in that final decade of the 1st century.[1]

Several things lead us to this conclusion: (1) the Greek is sophisticated, some of the best in the New Testament, not likely from the pen of a Galilean fisherman. (2) As indicated in the 3rd chapter, Paul's letters have been collected and are being read as Scripture. Paul is obviously dead, and since he and Peter both died in the mid-sixties, Peter must be also.[2] (3) A later date is indicated by the use of "Babylon" to designate Rome. It calls up images of Babylonian forces overrunning Jerusalem and destroying Solomon's temple in 586 BCE. That reference doesn't appear until after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. (4) Finally, in the 5th chapter is an explicit indication that the letter was written by an elder (5:1).

Now, the importance of all that is not authorship. Many biblical writings are written posthumously to recall or to invoke the teachings of the one who is named. The importance here is to date the letter, it addresses a specific issue. If we assume the audience is the same as in I Peter, the churches in Asia Minor—Turkey—essentially the same churches addressed in Paul's letter to the Galatians—we know from other sources that those churches were plagued by controversies over interpretations of Scripture and false teachings that impact their moral conduct.[3]

The false teaching claimed that the belief in the return of Christ was a "cleverly devised myth," and they should discard it. Their reasoning was based on a belief that his return would occur during the first Christian generation. 3:4, reads "Scoffers will come, saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers [probably a reference to Peter's generation] fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation'."

We can identify. Christ has not *yet* returned (at least not in a recognizable physical form) and some expressions of this expectation can come across a little embarrassing—can seem out of touch with the realities of this world, where justice too often is left undone. Things are as they always have been! How can intelligent people take the return of Christ seriously? Why not just admit it and move on?

The author of II Peter wants more for his readers. His problem is credibility; how to speak with authority. His concern is our concern. One way to focus our quest during our "Breakthrough" emphasis is to ask, "How can we speak believably to a cynical culture that doesn't trust anything that looks like a church? When the loudest voices representing the church are more likely to repel than to attract?"

About a century ago, a famous evangelist visited Mahatma Gandhi and asked him, "Why do you reject Jesus?" Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject your Jesus. I love Jesus. It's your Christians that give me problems."

[2] Ibid. p. 724.
[3] Ibid.

The most common image of Christianity, as represented by the loudest voices of the church, lacks credibility, and speaks with no authority except within its own closed cocoon of dogma. It lacks credibility because it lacks integrity. It waves a Bible and shouts the name of Jesus, but its behavior more closely resembles the Scribes and Pharisees for whom Jesus reserved his harshest criticism.

The writer of II Peter had his false teachers, and we have ours. And, yes, I speak under the judgment of Jesus' counsel to take the log from my own eye before I take the speck from my neighbor's. Our quest, like Peter's, is for credibility.

When credibility and authority are in question, the confidence and hope of a church are in question. Where do we turn? The text in II Peter resorts to the name of one who was "there" at the beginning—Simon Peter's eyewitness experience on the Mount of Transfiguration—a visible manifestation of Christ glorified and an audible affirmation, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7)

Those words communicate a level confidence the writer of II Peter is convinced will carry sufficient credibility and authority to sway a church at risk.

At the same time the author recognizes that no name, not even Peter's name, will ultimately be enough. Trust finally relies upon the word and promise of God that resides in the "power and presence" of Christ. And an eyewitness to the Transfiguration insists that presence continues to live within the faith community: ***"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"*** (verse 16).

"The power and coming." The word is Parousia, and means, simply, "coming" or "presence;" although it frequently is applied as "second coming." (That phrase is not in the Bible, and rarely appears in historic Christian writings prior to the late 19th century when it was popularized by evangelist, Dwight L. Moody on the basis, not of Scripture, but of the teachings of John Nelson Darby.) Given the context and the clear reference to Peter's eyewitness experience, the word here most likely refers to the authority and power demonstrated in the experience of the ongoing "presence" of Christ within his disciple community.

And how is that known? How will we affirm that presence among us? How will that presence be reflected in a credible way through our congregational life and ministry and witness? How will a cynical, disillusioned yet spiritually hungry public receive our witness as credible and convincing?

At another time, in another place, the one whose name today's epistle bears was eyewitness to yet another standard of credibility and authority. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." John 13:35 (NRSVUE)

Pastoral Prayer

Concerns:

- Victims of the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria
- Tanvi and her family (day 39)
- March 3-4 Regional Board Meeting ~ Bill Lacy, as Vice Moderator/Moderator-Elect of the Region, will be participating.
- We had a wonderful time on Ash Wednesday, imposing ashes on more than in previous years. We got to meet some new people in the community, who came for ashes and communion. We heard some strong testimony from some of those who participated and we had some strong participation in our Lenten Study. It was a good day.
- We have completed our 21 Days of Prayer. Zig Ziglar used to say that if you do anything for 21 consecutive days it becomes a habit; so, the intention has been to establish that habit, and to continue to pray for our church, not for just 21 days, but for 50 more days until our day of prayerful discernment as we seek to know God's vision for us—and then to continue to pray daily for God's guidance in our lives. Continue to refer to the book by Dawn Weaks, and continue to use the daily prayer guides, including the patterns of meditation and contemplative prayers.

Lord God, as we move into the season of Lent, we remember the temptations of your son in his journey through the wilderness; and we remember how he triumphed over all.

Some of us received ashes this week, reminding us of our own mortality and expressing our grief over our own imperfections. We received them in the shape of a cross, reminding us of your Son's death and resurrection, and expressing our hope of overcoming—our hope of meaningful, fulfilled living.

Today we are aware of many who face difficult journeys in life. Some cry out almost daily; social media is filled with their cries of loneliness and stress and anxiety—their grief over lost or damaged relationships. Our prayer for them is that they may receive the same strength and power you gave to Jesus in the wilderness—maybe through some word, or some act of kindness, from us.

May our own experience in the wilderness lead us to clarity of your call upon our lives, both individually and as a congregation. Grant us discernment. Give us ears to hear, eyes to see, give us hearts of empathy, and guide our feet to some human need, and our hands to meet that need.

We pray that faith may be deepened in this period of Lent, and that we all may walk in the light of the Lord. We pray in his name. Amen.