

God With Us

2 Peter 1:16-21
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First Presbyterian Church
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I'm reading a book titled "I, Saul" by Jerry B. Jenkins. In the book, the Apostle Paul is just a boy whose father has taken him to Jerusalem to interview at schools to become a rabbi. The director of one of the schools turns to young Paul, known then as Saul, and says, "Tell me about you and God. Do you feel as if you know Him, or just about Him?"

Paul responds, saying, "I have told my father and my rabbi that I wish I could walk and talk with God the way Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did." Paul's father responds, saying, "Both Rabbi Daniel and I have cautioned Saul not to expect so much." Don't expect to know God, to feel as if you could talk with him, to feel his presence, as if he's walking through life alongside you.

How well do we know God? How close a relationship are we able to have? Does God speak to you, and if so, what does he say? How well do you listen? How well do you follow?

Second Peter was written at a time when Christians found themselves wondering if Jesus as God Incarnate really did walk the earth. And can we really believe his promise to return in power and glory? This was not long after Paul and the other Apostles planted and nurtured dozens of churches throughout the Roman Empire and as far away as Mesopotamia. Of course, Rome was not happy with this, and just a few decades later Paul is imprisoned and executed. As the persecution of Christians and Jews spreads and becomes more brutal, some begin to question the stories of Jesus. Was he really the Son of God? Did the resurrection really happen or was it just made up? Can we trust his promise of coming again? After all, they expected Jesus to return within their lifetime and, instead, they're seeing just the opposite – churches and synagogues becoming more disconnected and losing their influence in society.

Well, we've all experienced such struggle and discouragement, and not just with the national decline in church attendance. There are lots of things in life that don't pan out for us, whether it's career opportunities, family life, health, financial resources, comfort in your retirement, hope for the next generation. So much of this is out of our control. Our faith tells us that God cares about us, that church life matters, that the Lord will lead the way to peace and prosperity for all, and yet reality tells a different story. What are we to believe?

Faced with this same question, Second Peter returns to the foundation of life, the foundation of our faith. "... We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ," says Peter, "but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty." Peter seems to know there will always be those who undermine the reality of what we know and believe just to build themselves up and get their own way. We see that all the time – people using deception and lies to control and influence others.

There has to be something we can do to help people see and believe the truth. For Peter, it was a matter of sharing what he had seen, how he came to believe.

On the mountaintop with Jesus, Peter, James and John became eyewitnesses to the truth and power of the Lord, when they heard God say, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." "We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain," says Peter. "So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed."

That is what did it for Peter. From that moment on, he knew Jesus was the only hope for this world, and nobody could convince him otherwise. Amid all the struggle and persecution and tragedy in this world, Peter could always return to what he saw and heard – "This is my Son, My Beloved..." – proof that Jesus is the power and the glory.

What is it for you that underpins your faith? Do you remember a time when you came to believe once and for all that faith in Jesus is the most important power and truth the world could ever have?

I can think of three times in my life, all of which I've shared in sermons before. One was when I was staring up despondently from my bed in college at a Day-Glo poster of Jesus rescuing Peter walking on water. Another was my father's response to my plans to go to seminary, when he said, "I don't see why you'd want to do that," and I was able to reply, "Well, we've never talked about it; maybe someday we will." We never had to; he became my biggest supporter. And the third was when my first wife, Lynn, was dying of cancer and I found myself making her a Christmas card that said, "We must never forget God's many blessings," when there were no blessings in sight.

God speaking to us in such moments – that's all it takes to overcome all the negativity, all the struggles and tragedy, all the lies and deceit, and ground yourself in the faith. Just remember those "God moments" in your life. Can you think of one?

Thinking back on his "God moment," Peter says to those struggling in the faith, "You would 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." You would do well to be attentive to these "God moments."

They are what will get you through the darkest times, as you remember and share them with others. And they don't even have to be things that happened to you. Maybe you've seen or heard about something that convinced you of the presence and power and hope of Jesus.

Shortly after the great missionary doctor, Albert Schweitzer, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953, he was visiting Chicago and a large group of reporters and politicians turned out to greet him at the train station.

As Dr. Schweitzer stepped off the train, news cameras flashed and city officials lined up to be photographed beside the renowned humanitarian. Just then, this missionary doctor saw something far off that attracted his attention. Walking through the crowd, he approached an elderly African-American woman who was struggling with two large suitcases. Smiling, he picked up the bags and escorted her to the steps of her bus. Seeing this, a member of the reception committee turned to one of the reporters and said, "That's the first time I ever saw a sermon walking."

That's what keeps the light of Christ shining brightly in this world – stories like that or others from your own life. So, if that light ever seems to be fading around you, if your faith begins to falter, now you know what to do. Listen and look for how God is speaking to you, the faith stories you've heard and experienced. Let those moments be the foundation you stand upon, the strength that lifts you up.

And so that this world never loses sight of the truth and power and hope of Jesus, find ways to share those moments with others. Peter and the other disciples faced the same struggles we face amid a largely disinterested world. But they knew – they knew the power of what they had seen and experienced, and so do we. We must never forget God's many blessings, even and especially when they are nowhere in sight. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, you have enriched and enlightened us by the revelation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Comfort us in our mortality and strengthen us to walk the path of your desire, so that by word and deed we may show forth the gracious news of your faithfulness and love.

By your Spirit, O God, aid us in our journey, so that our words and deeds point to the Lamb of God. For those who are suffering, let us point to Christ through comfort. For those in grief, let us point to Christ through hope.

Almighty God, whose Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, is the Light of the World: Grant that your people may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshiped and obeyed to the ends of the earth.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, and in whose name we now pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.