

Convincing Witness

Psalm 2
II Peter 1:16-21

What did God make you to do? The author of II Peter understood the question. Writing three to four generations after the people in the New Testament lived, this man addressed a growing church with issues. Two primary questions had come to his attention: theology and praxis. What Christians believed—theology—and how they lived out their faith—praxis. In the ancient world writing in the name of an important person whom everybody knew had not actually written your words (like the Apostle Peter) was an accepted practice. If you had the wisdom and power of your ultimate authority (in this case, of course, God) behind you, your work had ultimate authority. The Apostle Peter had followed Jesus in person. He had seen and heard things. Now, decades later, other Jesus followers needed guidance. And whoever wrote II Peter had heard the word of the Lord urging him to provide it.

One of his primary goals was to help Jesus followers identify their callings. Knowing what to believe—theology—to what ministry has God called you—praxis? Today, it seems we spend more time trying to define the former than the latter. And it may be because the former is more comfortable. We can spend all day every day plus Sunday trying to figure out what to think before we ever have to address the harder question of what to do about it. Think about the issues in front of us this week. Gun

violence. Environmental disasters. Chinese spy balloons. We can find so much more satisfaction figuring out how to get angry about things than we can deciding what to do about them. When a balloon drifts across our borders we can blame our political opponents for allowing it or we can think uncomfortable thoughts about how to prevent flyovers. When another broken soul kills people with a gun we can blame the tool and/or we can think uncomfortable thoughts about how a person becomes so twisted as to shoot. We know at the deepest level that if we really want to solve the problem we must address both the availability of weapons *and* the twistedness of souls. But the twistedness of souls sounds unsolvable. So we don't try to solve it.

“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,” the author of II Peter wrote. He addressed Christians in the churches of today’s Turkey and Syria, where the horrific earthquakes struck some fifteen days ago. Faith in Jesus as the Son of God had spread north from his native Israel. The first known Christian congregation, in Antioch, Syria, had by then existed for about forty years. Plenty of time for issues about how to worship and what to believe about Jesus to arise. The author of II Peter felt an urgent desire to address these issues. Whoever he was, he almost certainly lived near the “home office” of Christianity—at that time, Jerusalem—and had heard through letters and eyewitness accounts of problems in the churches of today’s Israel, Lebanon and Syria.

I think my favorite acronym is BOO—the Presbyterian **B**ook **o**f **O**rders. The BOO

is our denomination's constitution, our singular founding document. Though filled with rules and protocols—things that do *not* make my heart sing—the BOO also contains amazing, God-breathed wisdom, especially in its opening chapters. Its very first paragraph, which was written by a national meeting of Presbyterians held in Philadelphia before the meeting that produced that other kinda cool document, the Declaration of Independence, reads thusly: “The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. This one living God, the Scriptures say, liberated the people of Israel from oppression and covenanted to be their God. By the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came to live in the world, die for the world, and be raised again to new life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ announces the nearness of God’s kingdom, bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord’s favor upon all creation.”

I attended seminary in a place close enough to the church building where those words were crafted to have visited it on Sundays when I did not have obligations in other sanctuaries in central New Jersey. (My friends and I also attended basketball games in Philadelphia at the Spectrum, where IU had won the national championship in 1981 and where I saw Santa Claus attacked, but I will not tell that story in a sermon.) To return to the point, the Book of Order contains godly wisdom. What do we believe? The Gospel is Good News. God created all that exists. The James Woods Space Telescope, a newly operative instrument, recently revealed that in a

view within the span of a grain of sand held at arm's length it had found billions of galaxies, each in turn consisting of billions of stars. The JWST also found a planet with water—our primary clue to life as we know it. And we believe God made it all.

The Book of Order also affirms that God entered into covenant with the Israelites, not a promising or numerous people. But for God's purposes they became the People of God. We must decide whether to believe this. We have reasons not to believe it. The Israelites then and now irritate other peoples. They do not easily assimilate into other cultures. They control mostly arid territory in the cross hairs, thousands of years ago and now, between far greater powers. In Bible times those powers were Egypt and Persia. Today they are us and everybody who needs the Middle East's oil. Why would God choose such contentious real estate? We do not know. But this actually bolsters the biblical argument for God's sovereignty. The more likely the explanation, the more likely some human author wrote it. The less likely, like the Bible, the more likely that God inspired it.

The Book of Order presses on to claim that “by the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ...” The God who determined to enter into covenant with a lowly people became a lowly person. God decided to plan to save humanity by becoming one of us. And not only did God decide to become born as one of us, the BOO tells us God decided to die as one of us. Since I was maybe 12 or 13, death has bothered me. Once I became aware of its seeming finality, death angered me. In the past year Linda and I have had to confront this reality. We have lost a

granddaughter and a beloved dog. And it is surprising how much our dog's death has haunted us. I cannot speak for Linda (and I chose not to raise the topic with her in advance) but both deaths have hurt me. We never knew our granddaughter because she was miscarried about six weeks before her due date. So her tragic death has caused me more pain through her parents' pain—especially, for me, our son's. Our dog was troubled, but also an unconditional lover and a beautiful soul. It's been six months but very time I enter our house I still miss her boundless love, her snuffles of greeting, the look in her eyes. Every time.

Yet God chose to redeem us by dying as we do. Why? We cannot know for sure, but does it not seem probable that God knew the only way we could understand the profound nature of our need was the only way we ever learn anything? The hard way. The desperate way. Two weeks ago I listened to a person I hardly know talk about how she had finally, after years of searching, understood a problem she had been facing. She had read about it. She had talked about it to wise, smart people in her life. She had watched videos about it. But she had finally come to terms with it only when she had kept hitting her head against a brick wall against it for too long. I do not know the exact nature of her problem. But I do feel I understand her solution. It is this: accept that God has experienced the frustration. Understand that God has experienced the pain. Believe that God has experienced the resolution.

The Book of Order tells us that God has brought the Good News to “those who are impoverished...” We might fall into the fallacy of thinking this means only the poor.

It means all who experience poverty, whether physical or spiritual. It means us. II Peter tells us that the Jesus who died also was glorified, on the Mount of Transfiguration (to which our passage refers) and also in his resurrection. Do we believe this and do we believe we are therefore called to ministry in his name? What did God make you to do? God made you to use the power of the risen Christ to bring hope and healing to a fallen world.

Maybe God made you to teach the Bible. Maybe God made you to build access ramps to people in wheelchairs. Maybe God made you to listen to aging, lonely souls. Maybe God made you to record the annals of a Presbyterian Church. The point is, God made you. Now, what will you do about that?!?

A woman once told me God had made her to care for animals, an integral part of God's creation. A woman of position and means, she was totally deaf and struggled to read lips. She lived in virtual isolation from other human beings. But she could care for animals, especially llamas. So she used her resources to support the church where I preached and she could not hear me. She took our youth group on a hike with a llama named Jockamo along the Pacific beach in Oregon. She mentored my wife, then a young and impressionable girl. She was a wonderful wife to her husband, a federal judge. Kit and George had a code, a set of facial expressions that communicated most of what they need to say. Kit knew Jesus in his suffering, his deficits. And she believed in his promises. **That** is why God made us. To learn how we might witness to that truth. Flawed as we are, to witness.