



First United Church of Oak Park

First Hand
2 Peter 1:1-21, selected verses
The Rev. John Edgerton
February 23, 2020

On was the day that I was baptized, I was 26 years old; it was Easter Sunday. I was baptized full immersion in the baptistry at the American Baptist and UCC dual-affiliated church in Hyde Park. Hyde Park Union Church. And the water was so cold it felt like an electric jolt on my chest when I went under and I came up gasping for air like one who was near-drowned.

An hour later, I was walking to go meet some friends for lunch. They had come to be there for my baptism, but they didn't want to wait until I was done talking to people after church. So they went ahead to get a table for lunch and told me to take my time. As I was walking down the street, a small, strange realization dawned on me. I hadn't committed any sins in the hour since I'd been baptized. Now, understand, I don't go around cataloguing my daily sins; this was really a realization that I hadn't done much of anything: I sang hymns, I prayed, I talked to and embraced people I loved.

I had been baptized—all of my sins had been forgiven, washed away along with my dignified solemnity as I came up gasping like a fish. My sins had been forgiven, and since I had managed to more or less accidentally avoid sinning for the hour since my baptism, I suddenly realized as I walked down the street that I was at that moment—without sin. I was free. The sunshine was transfigured around me, the light through the sparse leaves of early spring was the light of the loving countenance of God lifted up upon me. I walked the quarter mile to the restaurant slowly, savoring every step. I'll remember that moment until memory itself passes from me.

There are only a few such moments in my life. Moments, I mean, when I could feel first-hand the presence of God, moments when the unremarkable was transfigured into the indelible. On the shoulder of a highway in Indio, California, after what could have been a horrible car-wreck turned out to be nothing but a fender bender and for the first time felt sheer gratitude. On my knees in prayer at my bedside, desperate for God to lift me, praying "I believe, help my unbelief", and for the first time felt what it was like to know with quiet certainty that my prayer had been answered. There are only a few such moments in my life. Moments, I mean, when I could feel first-hand the presence of God.

I don't talk about these things much. It's not because I'm ashamed of these things. Quite the opposite, this small clutch of precious moments are for me the very core of how I know God. I'm afraid to share them because I'm afraid of what people would say or think. Perhaps people might listen to one of these experiences and judge me as lacking in sophistication or erudition. Or perhaps they might listen to those spiritual experiences and decide I lacked objectivity. Or perhaps, worst of all, they might listen to the most precious stories of my faith and think, that's it? That's the closest you've ever felt with God? What a sadly unspiritual man.

It's all my own fears, that's why I don't share these things more. But these experiences, these stories, my faith itself, God has not given me faith only for its own sake. God has given me faith in order that I might help build up the faith of others too.

It was the late first century, in Rome, and the earliest Christians were caught up in controversy. What was the faith going to be all about? What were the newest converts going to be told about how Christians should live their lives, how they ought to testify to hope? People needed faith and they looked to those with first-hand experience with Jesus to share their faith. So the Apostle Peter, or more likely one of the pupils who had learned the faith directly from Peter, wrote down a testimony.

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. For he received honour and glory from God almighty when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, '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.

Peter and two of the other disciples closest to Jesus accompanied Christ up a mountain. And as Jesus prayed there, a great light brighter than the sun in spring, light like the loving countenance of God lighted up everything. And Jesus' face and his body and his clothes, they were transfigured before them from the ordinary to the indelible, a sight that would not depart Peter until memory itself failed him. And a voice from all around saying, "this is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Peter didn't tell anyone, not for a long time. That's what the gospels say. Peter didn't tell anyone for a long time. And I understand why. This precious thing, this memory of a moment of first hand experience of God, he knew that it was not going to sound like a cleverly devised myth like people were used to hearing. If he told people, perhaps they would judge him as lacking in erudition, or of being utterly lacking in objectivity, or perhaps worst of all they would say: this was the right hand man of Jesus, and this, THIS, is the closest thing he has to an encounter with God? What a sadly unspiritual man.

Peter didn't tell anyone, not for a long time. Not until it became clear that people needed faith. They needed to be built up. Jesus did not invite Peter up that mountain to see this glorious vision simply to build up Peter's faith, though it did build up Peter's faith. God did not give Peter faith only for his own sake; God gave Peter faith so he could share it with others too. And so he shared, he testified to his faith, sharing what he had known, first hand.

What, for you, I wonder are those few moments? What for you are those few moments when you have felt God close at hand? When did you have first hand experience with God? If you're like me, it probably isn't anything dramatic—a moment here, a moment there, something that were someone else to see it would say "there is nothing happening here, just a man walking to a restaurant on a sunny Easter Sunday afternoon."

If you're like me, or like Peter, those few God-moments in your life are something you haven't talked to anybody about; not for years, maybe not ever. What are those moments, that are truly yours, that you won't forget until memory itself should fail you? You're thinking of it right now. Those moments, or that one moment perhaps, even, they are a gift from God. These first hand experiences of God, they are gifts meant to build up your faith. Treasure them, and let them be a strong foundation that you trust in. Even if you feel that doing so makes you a bit lacking in erudition, even if grounding your faith on a few moments makes you feel lacking in objectivity, even if you look at the moments when you have felt closest with God and think, this is

not particularly close to God, I am sadly not very spiritual. Treasure those moments; they are a gift from God to build up your faith.

They are for your faith, And. AND. They are for more than simply your own faith. The times when the spirit of God has come close to you and felt like the light of the loving countenance of God lifted up upon you, you should share those moments with other people. You should give testimony and help build up other people's faith. Even if you know that the stories of your own faith will not sound like cleverly devised myths or theological treatises. Find a way to share your faith.