

Transfiguration + February 26, 2017
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
2 Peter 1:16-21
“God’s prophetic grace”

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This past week I attended a Mission Development/Redevelopment conference in Chicago. I was there with a group of four students from Wartburg Seminary and our professor, in a sea of 350 Mission Developers and Redevelopers. I was only dimly aware of this vocation until the committee that is overseeing my seminary program told me that I should come to this, because they were thinking it would give me some new ideas. It did—12 pages’ worth, actually--and you’ll be hearing about some of those as we move forward in mission together here at Atonement.

There were a lot of people of color at this conference, both leading and attending. It was uplifting to be part of such a vibrant cross-section of humanity. In this milieu, however, the Department of Homeland Security’s recent guidance on executing the President’s immigration policies hung heavily in the air. It’s not the fact of deportation as such, which has been going on for a long time, but the way people are being rounded up—targeting immigrants not only convicted of crimes, even minor, but those charged with crimes and, for people who have been here less than two years, anyone who an immigration agent, not a judge, thinks has committed a crime. And all this is happening very aggressively. The 20,000 Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents all over the country, known as ICE, have had their shackles taken off, so to speak. So imagine these scenarios: ICE agents waiting outside a church shelter where undocumented immigrants had gone to stay warm; ICE going into courthouses, looking for anyone who looked like a foreigner; ICE forcing passengers on transcontinental flights from the West Coast to show documents before allowing them to get off the plane. Fantasy? No: These things actually happened just in the past few days. This has created panic in

every immigrant population all over the country, including that at Parroquia San Jose across the river at St. Paul Lutheran Church. Immigration lawyers say they've never seen anything like it.

Back at my conference, Ruben Duran, the ELCA's program director for new congregations and himself an immigrant, reported that several people from various countries had been planning to attend but cancelled their trips because they were afraid something might go wrong with their visas. So to brighten the mood, he told us a story.

At this same conference a few years ago in San Diego, Ruben had taken a group of Latino pastors on a short sightseeing trip into Mexico. On the way back, one named Maria was detained at the border by three officials who claimed there was a problem with her passport. Soon it became clear this wasn't going to get resolved quickly, so Ruben sent the rest of the group on ahead and he waited with Maria. She was taken into a back office for questioning. As time dragged on Ruben grew more and more anxious, unable to get any information about what was happening or why. Finally, in desperation he slipped through an open door. He made his way down the hall and found where Maria was being held. What he saw through the window astonished him. The three immigration agents were still in the room with Maria. But they were on their knees, and Maria was standing over them, laying hands on them and praying over them. Soon after Ruben and Maria were on their way back to San Diego.

Ruben had witnessed God's prophetic grace, the inbreaking of God's kingdom in an unexpected way, that testified to the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is what the writer of the second letter of Peter is addressing in our reading today when he says, "So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed." The prophetic message here is the pronouncement by God the Father of the identity of Jesus as God's Beloved Son, which carries within it the gift of Jesus Christ *for us*—that even in the

midst of our sin we have God's forgiveness and salvation, and the promise that in the fullness of time as Christ returns to earth in power and glory.

The point the writer is making in this passage is that the promised return of Christ, which some call the Second Coming, isn't a myth: It is prophecy, a testimony to truth, that comes from God. Peter's experience of the Transfiguration is not a foreshadowing of the resurrection, but a witness to Christ's role as God's promised ruler for the world. The honor, glory, and love declared about Jesus at the Transfiguration prefigures what he will bring for the world when he comes. It is in this confident hope that the church continues to live.

You can really hear this in the modern-day translation of the Bible into contemporary language by an American pastor, Eugene Peterson, known as "The Message." Rev. Peterson's version of these verses from Second Peter give us language that so vivid that you can almost reach out and touch it. Here's how that goes (you may want to follow our second reading in your bulletin, to compare):

We weren't, you know, just wishing on a star when we laid the facts out before you regarding the powerful return of our Master, Jesus Christ. We were there for the preview! We saw it with our own eyes: Jesus resplendent with light from God the Father as the voice of Majestic Glory spoke: "This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of all my delight." We were there on the holy mountain with him. We heard the voice out of heaven with our very own ears.

We couldn't be more sure of what we saw and heard—*God's* glory, *God's* voice. The prophetic Word was confirmed to us. You'll do well to keep focusing on it. It's the one light you have in a dark time as you wait for daybreak and the rising of the Morning Star in your hearts. The main thing to keep in mind here is that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of private opinion. And why? Because it's not something concocted in the human heart. Prophecy resulted when the Holy Spirit prompted men and women to speak God's Word.

Where in your lives have you experienced God's prophetic grace? Events or actions that testified to the power of God and salvation in Jesus Christ, just as Ruben Duran witnessed when all hope seemed lost? The power of prayer was the light shining on that dark time in the customs office. Many of you already know the power of prayer. Sometimes prayer saves our lives: In times of crisis

when we don't know what to do or which direction to turn, God shows us the way if we only think to ask him for help. Other times, prayer simply helps find something we temporarily misplaced: "God, just show me where it is," we finally say, then presto, there is that thing we'd been tearing our hair out searching for, probably right under our noses.

But prayer takes courage. First, we must acknowledge that we are in a dark place to begin with—that we need God, and are seeking a prophetic Word of grace. This is the posture of turning to God, which we'll be talking about a lot as we move into our 40-day Lenten journey. In seeking God's help we are humbling ourselves because we're admitting we can't do it on our own. It is the first step toward being cured of pride, the deadliest of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Then, in prayer, we must have the courage to listen. We must be open and attentive to God's voice, just as Peter, James and John were on that high mountain in Matthew's account of the Transfiguration. We might not like at first what we hear: Like those three disciples, we might be overcome with fear and fall right down onto the ground. But God's prophetic witness to the inbreaking of the kingdom is never what we expect, because it testifies to new life in Christ and a new way of being. God in Christ God is making all things new.

In the coming weeks as we walk on our baptismal journey toward Easter, we will be listening more closely for God's voice. If we are fearful, or scared, and or not open to new modes of being, we will be missing the whispers of the Spirit in our midst and those signs of new life in God's kingdom. Along this road I invite you to join God's people to experience what God is already doing--reconciling and restoring the world in his Son, and through the Holy Spirit. AMEN.