

Today we are continuing our study of 2 Peter. There are a couple of points that I want to touch base on from last week's reading. First, Peter is writing this knowing that his end is near. He knows that he doesn't have much time left and writes this letter to all Christians everywhere. His first letter was believed to be written for Jewish Christians, but this letter is written for everyone.

Second, he reminds us that we need to live a righteous life and embrace the teachings of Jesus. He breaks down what it means to be a good Christian: faith, knowledge, godliness, love, and hope. He reminds us that Jesus died so that our sins would be cleansed and we can gain entry into heaven.

In today's reading we come to the heart of Peter's letter. He is discussing the importance of us not following false teachers. It seems like such an easy concept, so who would fall for a false teacher?

During the first century there were a lot of people presenting themselves as followers of Jesus and using the early Christian church to promote themselves financially. My Jewish Commentary on the New Testament called it "the first record of the *sleaze factor*". Peter was calling out these sinners and miscreants for taking advantage of the church.

But, this past week I was talking with a couple of other ministers about how you could identify a false teacher today. One person was animate that ordained clergy or someone enrolled in the seminary could never be a false teacher. We were chosen by God to spread the good news, anyone else is a false teacher. Now, there are a couple of points right away that I did not agree with her about, but I let her say her peace.

She felt that the Holy Spirit fills clergy at all times and whatever we say is directly from God's mouth. We no longer have independent thought. We only do God's will. The Holy Spirit works through us. Everyone else in the church is fallible, because they have not been called to preach.

This brought up a lot of questions in my mind, like your church has no lay authority? Your deacons can't administer care? What about your Sunday School teachers or Bible study leaders? Does your church only allow ordained clergy to fill these positions?

She told me that they were all filled with lay leaders. But, their Senior Pastor instructs each one on what to say and what to do. They can only do and say what he has instructed them to do. If someone asks a question that he has not prepared for, then the leader will take it to him and will follow-up at a later time.

To me this sounds like he is a false teacher. He is directing every individual's thought and belief in God. There is no room for discussion or communication. It is simply a because I said so mentality. How can you be assured that the senior pastor has the church's best interest at heart and not his own arrogance? What true authority does he have to have that much power over everyone?

In today's reading, Peter starts right off with establishing himself as an authority. He separates himself from other teachers by telling the reader that he was with Jesus on the mountain during his transfiguration. He heard God proclaim that Jesus was his son.

In the next part of the scripture, Peter is quoting from Numbers. First he says that the day dawns and the morning star will rise in your heart. This is prophetic about the second coming of Christ. The day is the day of judgment and the morning star is a descendant of Jacob.

Peter also reminds us that prophecy and scripture come from the Holy Spirit. They do not come from men or women. We do not interpret the word of God, he uses us as a vessel to share his knowledge, wisdom, and love. False teachers twist this and teach what is beneficial for them. They hide their fallacies and wrong doings, and promote themselves in the best light and claim to do it in God's name.

See that is a hard point for me. So many of us read the bible differently and we hear and see God's wisdom differently than others. Who would be the false teacher? The minister that told me a couple of weeks ago that I am not welcome in his church, his interpretation of the bible is completely different from mine. Even though we do not agree on most points, I do not believe him to be a false teacher. I believe that God speaks through him in ways that some people need to hear God's word.

But, then there are others who use their position in the church to promote their self interests. They hide in the shadows and promote agendas that benefit themselves. They look for glory over helping others, over doing the right thing for right's sake.

That brings me to the second point that Peter was preaching from Numbers. The story of Balaam. To be honest, it had been a long time since I had read about Balaam, so I refreshed my knowledge of his story (Numbers 22-24).

For those of you who do not remember, I will give you a very simplified version of his story. Balaam was a great prophet around 1400 BCE, this was the time that Moses would have been leading the Israelites out of the wilderness and into Moab. Balak was king of Moab and wanted the Israelites out of his kingdom, but he knew that he was not strong enough to get them out, so he sent for Balaam to put a curse on them.

God came to Balaam in a vision and told him to not curse or do anything to the Israelites. Balaam turned down Balak's messengers and sent them away. Balak did not like this response and sent more servants to bring Balak to him. This time, God told Balaam that he could go with them, but he was still to leave the Israelites alone.

The next morning Balaam packed his mule and headed to Balak's palace. Balaam had a reputation of going to the highest bidder, so God did not trust that Balaam was not going to curse the Israelites and sent an angel to kill Balaam.

Balaam was blinded by his greed and did not see the angel, but his donkey did and would stray from the path to avoid the angel. Balaam got frustrated and hit the donkey. Eventually God spoke to Balaam through the donkey and asked why he hit the donkey when the donkey had never led him astray. Then Balaam could see clearly and saw the angel was prepared to kill him.

God came and spoke to Balaam many times about protecting the Israelites, but Balaam could not help being himself. It is kind of like the scorpion and the frog. The frog carries the scorpion across the river on his back, but half way across the scorpion stings the frog, knowing that they will both die. He does it because he cannot help himself from being who he is. Balaam is the same. God has given him the direction to save the Israelites. But, Balaam can't see past his own greed.

These are the people that Peter is warning us against. The people that do good because it makes them look good. Or they believe that by doing the right thing it will get them into heaven instead of doing the right thing because it is the right thing. These people cannot help themselves. They work their way into positions and then start helping their friends and finding ways to promote themselves.

Jesus didn't teach us to be that way. He taught us to treat others like we want to be treated. He reminds us that the first will be last and the last will be first in the kingdom of heaven. There is no need to self-promote because God already knows what is in our hearts.

There is fear O God, and there is uncertainty in many human hearts—
even in our hearts today—and for some—every day.

There is aimlessness in the hearts of others—
senseless excitements about the details of the end of time,
about the signs that are around us, for us to read and to understand—
and yet they have no peace in this knowing
and often argue about the meaning of things with others
instead of breathing in the strength of earth and sky
and breathing out love and compassion upon their own selves
and the self of the world around them—the world you have made.

O Great God,
you know about Fear, Aimlessness, Senseless excitements,
and deep depressions of the soul.
You understand the afflictions of the lonely—
of those who have no one to draw close to.
We pray especially today for these O God,
that they may know your presence and see your power
and be consumed by your glory
and so find that which we all need...

Shine your light, we pray,
upon those we name before you in our hearts now,
be it ourselves, or the person next to us,
or one we left at home,
perhaps one we heard about on TV
or the one who is our neighbor.
Peace, O God, to them as we lift them up before you now...

Lord, hear our prayer...