When I was in college a guy in my fraternity had a line that he would repeat if someone noticed us while we were doing something that we probably shouldn’t have been doing. When such an occasion presented itself he would, in an effort to make it look like we were not up to anything interesting, loudly blurt out, “So I said to the guy, I don’t care what country you come from, in America we eat with our fork.” My friend is now legal council for Twitter if that makes you feel any better about the state of the world. Anyway I always found this comment amusing and wondered if the people hearing us would try to reconstruct the conversation we appeared to be having in which this line made sense. My guess was they probably did because it is something we all do whether consciously or not. Our mind hates things that are not whole so we try and create wholeness out of smaller bits of information. Interestingly this is also the job we are tasked with in our Epistle lesson today. It is from 2nd Peter and it starts out by saying, “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 honor and glory from God the Father 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.” Okay, but it kind of leaves us asking what are these cleverly devised myths? Who it is that has accused Peter of using them and why Peter feels that there is a need to explain that he heard God identify Jesus as the Son of God? It seems like we entered an argument halfway through and what we are getting here is a rebuttal, but a rebuttal to what?

There are some verses that precede this passage where Peter talks about his imminent death and gives those receiving this letter some instructions for living, but nowhere does he tell us who exactly had their undies in such a bunch over these cleverly devised myths of which he appears to have been accused. So we are left trying to reconstruct the rest of the conversation. I have some theories about whom Peter might have been answering but most of those theories involved a one armed man or a guy who was trying to impress Jodie Foster so maybe it would be better to look at some Biblical commentaries or at least the commentary I found most interesting. According to the commentaries, the term, “’Cleverly devised’ implies that the doctrine of the [Second Coming] was concocted by deceit and ingenuity.” Okay so someone has accused Peter of making up the whole Jesus coming again business, but who? Well… let’s continue with the commentary. It states these folks may be, “The Epicureans…[who] considered the doctrines of providence and judgment of the wicked after death to be myths devised for social control.” Okay so now we have a name and since I am always up for some good Epicurean bashing let’s get rolling.

Now I must be honest and say that I have not studied the Epicureans a tremendous amount, but I do know that the ancient ones were not as fun as the modern ones. The philosophy was attributed to a guy named Epicurus (which makes sense if you think about it) who lived from 341 to 270 BC. He argued two big things: First, that the gods did not concern themselves with human affairs and second that pleasure was the highest good. His definition of pleasure however is what makes the ancient epicureans less fun than our modern ones or at least worse cooks. In his view the highest pleasure was the practice of virtue. So now that we have strayed down this path it’s worth asking what that has to do with the price of eggs. Well, first let’s recap…

This commentator argues that the conversation we have landed in the middle of has to do with a group of Epicureans who have accused Peter of cooking up a big story about Jesus coming back in order to get everyone to behave. Which is why Peter is saying that he did not cook everything up but rather was told by God himself. That is the point of him saying that he was there when God’s voice came from heaven. In other words it’s not a cleverly devised myth but the God’s honest truth. And this criticism has not gone away. The inheritors of the epicurean argument believe that virtue is something that is a product of our reason. It does not have divine origins but rather just kind of makes sense. The other side of this argument, i.e. the side Peter is on, says that our behavior should be in line with what God has instructed. Christianity (and Judaism) make the specific argument that we have been created in the image of God and because of this our behavior should be like God’s behavior. Now I assume that most of you know where I come down on this argument (I sort of preached a sermon on it a few weeks back). I believe that we are to behave in a virtuous fashion because God has reveled this way of behavior to us. In Peter’s argument today he talks about seeing the Transfiguration wherein Jesus was confirmed to be the Son of God. Through the reality of this event he is saying that he preaches what he does because God reveled the truth to him about the nature of Jesus of Nazareth.

Stepping back slightly from today’s argument it should be noted that the message of Christianity is based largely on the idea that God first moved. What I mean by this is that God moved and created the heavens and the earth, God moved and sent his Son to dwell among us. And as Peter says today God moved to reveal to us who Jesus of Nazareth was and is. And if we want to continue with this idea of God first moving and bring it to the context of something that is happening today, let’s see what we can take from this argument. Today we have a baptism, a place where God moved and does move. If you remember from the end of Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Jesus tells us to do something, -- to be baptized and to obey, which we do because he was revealed to be the Son of God in the Transfiguration. But it does not end there, it does not end simply with a command and this is the thing that the Epicureans miss. They say we cook up a myth as way to get people to behave. Certainly we call for people to behave because that is what God asks of us but it does not end there. In baptism or whatever else it is Jesus commands us to do, he gives a promise that in and through those actions he will be with us. God asks us to behave in certain ways and do certain things because he will be with us in those actions. In the Baptismal Service we will say, “Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised them to the new life of grace.” Behaving in a correct manner and following God’s instructions does not simply make society a nicer place to live (even though it does) but rather it unites us with God, it allows for us to be filled with God’s grace and God’s love. Following God’s commands is about so much more than getting people to be nice to each other. It is being filled with God grace and God’s love. These are not cleverly devised myths but are rather a place where God comes and meets us and marks us as Christ’s own this day and forevermore.