There are a number of theories about why religion in general and Christianity in particular have become less popular. That is lots of people have tried to explain why our society has grown more secular and why religious surveys show the greatest growth in those who identify as having no religious belief whatsoever. And while I am not sure the world needs one more opinion, I am going to offer a little thought because I sort of noticed something in the passage, we have from 2nd Peter today. This section was obviously chosen because it references the Transfiguration, which is what we commemorate today. And we will touch on that in a few minutes, but for right now let’s get to my brilliant or probably not so brilliant observation about the state of religion in the United States, and one of the possible causes of its demise.

The verse that got me thinking about the decline in belief of the Christian message is this one. It reads, “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.” What I found so interesting was where Peter located the essence of the Christian message. The basic thing he says is that the big deal about Christianity is Jesus. Which may sound obvious but stick with me for a minute. There are no “cleverly devised myths” as he says, but rather there is simply Jesus and his majesty. What I take this to mean, putting it into modern parlance, is there was no great marketing strategy or campaign promises that accompanied Peter’s presentation of the Gospel message. Again, it was just Jesus and his majesty. And this is where we start to get to my theory. What most people want these days are the cleverly devised myths. That is in order for them to give Christianity a try the message needs to come with some promises about how it can improve their lives. Is it going to make them smarter or richer or reduce their anxiety. Jesus is just not enough. But the thing is, if we are being honest, we cannot guarantee the results that people want. Becoming a Christian will change us, but it will not necessarily change us in the exact ways we think we need to change and furthermore the changes that come may not be without problems. And, when put in such terms, you can see why Christianity might not be so appealing for much of society, because we tend to enter most transactions expecting a specific thing to improve and if that doesn’t happen, we want our money back. But as Peter tells us what Christian’s promise is Jesus. It is a different message. It is not the message of Jesus and something else but rather the message is Jesus.

Now, as I said it is not that Christianity does nothing for us, but rather I am saying that what it does for us cannot fit into the framework of our current systems of evaluating something’s worth. And as a result, it might seem like the Church is not offering much; thus, the decline in adherence to Christianity. People want Jesus only if he brings something else along with him – something tangible. So the Church is left offering something that people think they don’t need. St Augustine said this when discussing time, “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know." That is something like how I feel when asked to make an argument for Christianity. I know what it is but in our current context the message is somehow lost in trying to explain it. For it seems to me that much of the problem our society has with Christianity is they no longer have a place in their minds to hear what it is saying. So, the question becomes how do you preach Christianity to a society that thinks of things as only being worthwhile if they come with a free set of steak knives? Well to answer that, let’s delve a little deeper into what we remember today – the Transfiguration.

The Transfiguration is remembered as being a pretty big deal, but why? No one was miraculously healed; manna did not come down from heaven. Rather something much different and less material happened. In the story Jesus goes up to a mountain to pray and is accompanied by James, Peter and John. While there we read that, “his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure.” The entire event centers on the way in which Jesus’ appearance changes and the presence of Moses and Elijah. The change in the appearance of Jesus is commonly interpreted to mean that Jesus, in this moment, appeared to the disciples as he really was – in his majesty as Peter calls it. Moses and Elijah are there as symbols of the law and the prophets demonstrating that Jesus is the fulfillment of both. In the whole process the disciples are really just spectators, they are not included in the conversations, nor are they really even acknowledged and yet this event is transformative. And I think the reason that it is transformative is because Peter, James and John finally have confirmation of who Jesus is. And for them that seems to have been enough. Which changes the question slightly for us and that is why is knowing Jesus for who he really is not enough for us? Why do we want Jesus plus something else?

For early believers the message that God became flesh and dwelt among us seems to have been the message. I mean that is what has the disciples so excited about today. They finally know. They finally know that this guy Jesus they have been hanging out with for the past few years really is who they thought he was. Peter is so overwhelmed that he mutters something about making three dwellings and Luke adds the editorial comment that Peter really did not know what he was saying. He was simply too astounded to come up with anything rational or coherent to say. And my point today is that in order for society to rediscover Christianity we may have to rediscover the awe and amazement of Peter. We have to be able to say that Jesus is simply enough. We do not need Jesus plus. Whatever that plus may be -- Jesus plus our politics, Jesus plus wealth, Jesus plus perfectly behaved children and so on. Peter, James, and John became overwhelmed when it was just them on a quiet mountain and they saw Jesus in all of his majesty. As I said at the beginning of this sermon, the message about Jesus is Jesus. Everything else that we might try and dress him up with will ultimately distract and disappoint. And I am not just making this up, for elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus seems to anticipate this.

In John’s Gospel after he has fed the 5,000 a group is following him when Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” In other words, they are interested in the wrong things. The crowds following Jesus are not interested in Jesus but rather in the stuff he brings along. He then tells them what is truly important, saying, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you.” In other words, all of the material stuff that we look for in a religion will ultimately fail because they are not eternal. Peter, James, and John today see Jesus as he really is and will be for all of eternity. That is why the Transfiguration is such a big deal. It is telling us that our faith is not built on something that is here today but gone tomorrow. Rather it is built on something eternal and never ending. For we are called to be God’s own not just today but for evermore.