

DO NOT BE AFRAID

MATTHEW 17:1-9
TRINITY MENNONITE CHURCH (DEWINTON, AB)
BY: RYAN DUECK
FEBRUARY 21, 2016/2ND SUNDAY OF LENT

It's a pleasure to be with you this morning. I bring you warm greetings from your sisters and brothers at Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

Will and I tried to find a way to coordinate this exchange so that we could be present when the other one preached at our respective churches, but that proved a task too difficult. It's hard to find guest speakers, evidently. 😊

I've gotten to know Will mostly in places outside of Alberta, ironically. We traveled to Colombia a few years ago with MCC and we've been in Montreal together for a Truth and Reconciliation event.

We've just heard the story of Jesus' transfiguration.

In most Christian traditions that pay any attention to the lectionary, Transfiguration Sunday is recognized on the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent (i.e., two Sundays ago).

But some Christians, primarily in the Roman Catholic tradition, choose the second Sunday of Lent to focus on this story.

Today we're going to locate ourselves amongst the Catholics. 😊

As Christians, we have a tendency to make God very, very big or very, very small.

The bigness of God is easy to think of. Wander outside during a clear, starry night. Hike to the top of a mountain. Walk along a beach or go sailing out on a lake or an ocean.

If you spend any time whatsoever in creation, you will know that there are times when the grandeur and the beauty of what God has made can overwhelm you.

I remember one day a while back when my daughter Claire and I were coming back from a swim meet in High River and the sun was setting over the mountains on a frigid winter day. There were shafts of light heading off into all kinds of angles with little white flecks of clouds interspersed throughout. It was beautiful!

Claire said, “Sometimes I’m amazed at how creative God is.” I couldn’t agree more.

But it’s not just the majesty of creation *out there* that makes us think of the bigness of God.

When we think about the mystery of existence itself—how it is that there should be such a thing as human beings, how it is that we there should be such a thing as brains that process a never-ending stream of data from nerves running throughout our bodies, that connect to arms and legs and fingers and toes, how it is that there could be such a thing as *consciousness* where electric impulses in our brains somehow lead to *thoughts* that seem to exist outside of our bodies...

It’s incredible.

Many philosophers and theologians have traditionally identified the quest for God with the quest for the *good*, the *true*, and the *beautiful*. In the deepest parts of who we are we know that these three things—goodness, truth, and beauty—are real and are not just expressions of what we happen to prefer.

All of this, we believe, is of God. God is both immanent and transcendent. Traces of God and God’s attributes can be seen all around us and even with us. At the same time, God is completely separate from the created order. God stands *over* all that he has made, supporting and sustaining the entire cosmos at every moment.

As Paul puts it in the book of Acts, “God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

And yet, at the same time we can often think of God in very small terms as well.

We think of God as our friend. We talk to God. We imagine that God is interested in the everyday details of our lives. Many Christians talk about God as if he were something like an imaginary friend.

We ask God to help us have a good day or enjoy our holiday. We ask for help in writing an exam or preparing a sermon (frantically... on a Saturday evening... for example ☺).

I'm sure some of us have even come across people or situations where it seemed like people were treating God in terms that were even a little *too* familiar. People who thank God for everything from securing a good parking spot or getting a bit of extra money back on their taxes or whatever.

I'm sure many of us have heard the expression "thank God" for things that we were quite certain were too trivial to warrant divine attention ☺.

So, we often go back and forth. Our understanding of the size and complexity of the universe has grown immensely over the years and we are awestruck at the God who could do this.

And yet, at times it seems that we have lost something of the reverence and holy fear that our ancestors had for God. Sometimes, we give the impression that God's interests start and stop with us.

The ancient Hebrews were not generally this schizophrenic. They mostly had a pretty big God.

Their God was the creator of all that was. Their God was the initiator of a covenant and they were his people. Their job was to fear the Lord and to obey.

There was emotional intimacy with this God. The Psalms make this very clear.

But in the Hebrew worldview, Yahweh was a God of holiness, a God of justice and truth. A God to be approached with reverent fear.

We see this in our text today.

Jesus brings Peter, James and John up on a mountain.

While there, Jesus is transfigured before their very eyes.

Not only is Jesus' appearance transformed into one of brilliant whiteness, but they see Elijah and Moses—these heroes of the Jewish faith—right there beside him!

The moment is rich with biblical symbolism. Many scholars are of the opinion that Elijah and Moses represent the Prophets and the Law, thus linking Jesus to the story of Israel and of these two massive figures, but also saying, by virtue of his dazzling whiteness, that Jesus was a prophet unlike any other—that God was speaking in an utterly unique and unprecedented way through him.

In addition, the words God speaks from the cloud almost exactly mirrors the divine speech at Jesus' baptism: This is my son, the beloved. With him I am well pleased" and then adds, "*Listen to him!*"

And what is the disciples response? Matthew 17:6:

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

They were overcome with fear.

They knew that they were on fearful, holy ground.

They had been raised in a tradition which said that no one could see God and live. They had been raised with the stories of Moses ascending Mt. Sinai and speaking to God on behalf of the people, because the people believed that if God spoke to them directly, they would die (Exodus 20:18-19).

They had heard the stories of God overwhelming Job out of the whirlwind, taking him on a tour of creation, asking him, "where were you when I did all of this? Do you presume to question me?!" They had images of God leading his people with pillars of fire and clouds in the desert.

They knew that their God was very big.

And so they were, quite rightly, terrified.

But it's fascinating to observe what comes next in the story. How does Jesus respond?

But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."
(Matthew 17:7)

Jesus *touched* them, and told them not to be afraid.

Just like he touched people throughout his ministry—dirty people, unclean people, sinful people, the wrong sorts of people... just like he set people free from a religious and political system based on fear and exclusion... now, at this moment when his divine identity is again revealed in a unique way, he shows that he is a God like no other.

Jesus demonstrated that, while he was indeed God's special anointed one—in a way that was far superior to Moses and Elijah, in a way that was, indeed, the culmination of Israel's entire story—he was also their friend and their brother, that he cared about them and what they were experiencing in that moment.

There is a temptation to look at events like the Transfiguration or any other miraculous event in the gospels (healings, exorcisms, Jesus baptism, the Incarnation and Resurrection themselves) as something like really powerful proofs that Jesus is divine—almost like magic tricks that prove how powerful Jesus is, that he comes with God's special stamp of approval.

But we must not stop with the miraculous nature of some of these stories.

Jesus does not want us to see simply a glowing white figure on top of a mountain, but also one who reaches over and touches quivering and quaking human beings and tells them not to be afraid.

The God who is very big is also small enough to touch us. The Christ who Scripture tells us is the one through who and for whom everything that exists has been made (Colossians 1:16), is the one who says, "It's ok, get up. Don't be scared."

We arrive here at one of the deep mysteries that runs throughout the Christian faith. Apparent opposites exist together.

Divinity and humanity.

Strength and weakness.

Transcendence and immanence.

Bigness and smallness exist together. The God who made the marvels that take your breath away is also the God who reaches out his hand to you, *personally*, and says, “You don’t need to be afraid.

This is both comforting and challenging.

It is comforting because we don’t have to think of God as some unapproachably remote creator who is distant from the affairs of ordinary human beings—that the God of the universe reaches out to us. To *us*.

It is challenging because we don’t have the *luxury* of thinking about God as an unapproachably remote creator who is distant from the affairs of ordinary human beings.

Many people would prefer an uninvolved God who we can thank for the marvels of creation and then move on with our lives. Many people are glad to believe in a kind of vague “higher power” to account for the sense of wonder that we sometimes experience, but have little desire to actually consider whether this higher power might have a claim on their lives.

Jesus doesn’t give us this option. The one who reaches out his hand and tells us not to be afraid is also the one of whom God the Father says, ***listen to him***. Do what he says. Follow him.

Let’s come down from the mountain into the world of our every day lives. Why does this scene have to do with you and me and our every day lives?

A few years ago, I attended a series of lectures at Regent College by the famous OT scholar Walter Brueggemann.

In speaking about the people of Israel’s dramatic exodus from Egypt and the long, complex story that followed, Brueggemann said this:

The life of faith is, in many ways, about “learning the sacred art of departing.” It is about learning how to leave the dominant narratives of our culture.

This phrase has stuck with me ever since as a powerful description of what the life of faith is: *The sacred art of departing*.

What does this mean?

Well, Brueggemann lives and breathes the Old Testament, so his focus was always on the people of Israel. For *Israel*, “the sacred art of departing” meant leaving the story of Egypt—a story of oppression and injustice and slavery and dehumanizing conditions and idolatry—and following God into the future.

It meant learning how to live according to a *new story*—learning how to trust and live in community, how to resist the lure of idolatry in all its forms, how to worship, what it meant to be a “blessing to the nations.”

Of course, this “sacred departing” didn’t always go very well.

Israel struggled and sinned and longed for the imagined security and relative comfort of Egypt. They had short memories, as so many of us do, when God places us in challenging circumstances.

They chafed under their leaders and complained against God. They *constantly* wandered off after other gods. They were forced to wander in the desert for forty years and, many years later when they were in the land, they suffered exile at the hands of a variety of foreign empires.

Israel struggled with the sacred art of departing—they could never fully leave or resist the temptations of other stories, other homes.

Of course the question is always put to us, too. How is *our* departing going?

There are many narratives out there that we need to be constantly departing from, ranging from the political to the personal.

But I think that one of the most prominent ones is that of fear.

I did a quick search this week, and this one phrase—“do not be afraid” occurs eighty one times in Scripture.

I’m not usually one for adding up the number of references to words or phrases in Scripture to prove their importance, but that’s a lot of “do not be afraid’s.”

I think there’s a reason *do not be afraid* shows up a lot.

Fear is a very natural response to the world. It is a narrative that is quite easy to go along with.

There will never be a shortage of things in our world and in our lives that will quite naturally call forth our fears.

The daily news gives us a steady stream of data to stoke our fears.

- Global political realities
- Terror
- Fear of other (Syrian refugee stories?)
- Ominous politics, polarizing, divisive scenarios in the future
- Economy (Alberta’s in rough shape)

The media we daily swim in depends upon narratives of fear to sell advertising in papers and on television, to generate clicks and views online.

Or, we could look to more personal stuff:

Maybe we battle with depression and wonder if we’ll ever be free.

Maybe it’s too many unanswered prayers that make us afraid that God isn’t really listening.

Maybe it’s the threat of disease.

Maybe it’s fear that strained relationship will never be mended.

Maybe it’s a fear that we’ve missed out on our purpose in life, that we are drifting aimlessly through life, without much direction.

Maybe we fear that our biggest existential questions don't have satisfying answers. *Who am I? What am I doing here? Does any of what I have given my life to really matter?*

There are many things that quite naturally call forth our fears. I'm sure there are many that you can think of that I haven't even mentioned.

The thing is, fear makes a kind of sense. It is a logical response to a world where there are real threats, a world where we can and will get hurt, a world that isn't always safe, a world where the certainty we crave isn't available, a world where so much happens that we can't manage or control...

A world where we will ultimately have to say goodbye and pass through death's final door.

So how can Jesus say to us, *Do not be afraid?* How can he call us to a life free from fear when there is so much to be afraid of?

The sacred departure from fear to love only makes sense if Jesus is who he is revealed to be on the mountain.

Did you notice what happened in the text right after Jesus told his disciples not to be afraid? Let's read verse 8 again:

When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

Moses and Elijah had receded from view and Jesus stood alone at the top of the mountain.

The law and the prophets give way to the Word of God in flesh as the final and authoritative revelation of what God is like.

When we look to Jesus, we see a life of sacred departing from fear.

Listen to Jesus. Listen to his *words* and listen to his *life*!

Listen to his teaching, to his example, to his patterns of love and mercy, to his path of sacrifice and compassion, to his nonviolence and love of enemies, to his death, resurrection, and future return.

Listen to the way in which he modeled what a life free of fear looks like.

It is because *this* Jesus is the one that stands alone at the top of the mountain—higher than the law, higher than the prophets, the very embodiment of who God is and what God wants from a human life—that we can live lives that are free from fear.

The longer I live, the more I am convinced that the opposite of love is not hate. It is fear.

Fear is what prevents us from living expansively, from loving generously and without conditions, from forgiving freely, from....

Fear is what prevents us from learning the sacred art of departing.

May God help us to continue to look to the one who stands alone on the top of the mountain, to see only Jesus as our example of what the art of sacred departing looks like.

May God help us to be people who are guided not by the fears that are naturally and easily called forth in our world and in our lives, but by the One who reaches out his hand to us and says,

Do not be afraid.

Amen.

