

A Transfiguration 2.23.20

Matthew 17:1-9

Focus Statement: You are safe here.

Here's a fun fact about your pastor you may not know, I am terrified of the plains. States like Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, places where you can see broad expanses of nothing but open fields and flatness make me super uncomfortable. I don't like how things like weather, locusts, hordes of marauding armies, can just cross these vast flatnesses, and you can see them coming for miles but there's nothing you can do about it, because there are no barriers between you and them.

My fear of flat places was an ongoing joke/argument between me and my friend Sally in seminary. I went to seminary in Illinois, I might add, not a place known for its stimulating topography. Sally, who I believe is actually from a sort of hilly part of Wisconsin but now appropriately lives in Iowa, would tease me about my anxiety around any weather happening anywhere in the state of Illinois. It's so far away, she'd say, there's nothing to worry about. To which I would argue, "it's far away but this place doesn't have any mountains, so there's nothing between it and us. What we need are a few more mountains. Mountains keep you safe."

I was thinking about this whole "mountains keep you safe" line recently, and it occurred to me that it's not mountain peaks that make me feel safe, it's the valleys. I like mountain peaks, don't get me wrong. I did a lot of rock climbing in college and in my twenties and I loved the feeling of accomplishment that came from reaching the pinnacle of something. This feeling probably aided by a cat-like appreciation of being on top of things. But while I

like the sense of accomplishment of reaching the top of something, being on top is not a place I want to dwell for any real length of time. While the view is great, mountain tops themselves are exposed and windswept, and I don't like being cold. I like to go up to the mountaintop and look around for a while, but it's in the going up and the coming down that the real sense of accomplishment lies.

The writer of Matthew's Gospel seems to share my appreciation for mountains. The Epiphany-Lent-Easter season of the church year especially gives us a tour of Matthew's mountainous terrain. For the last several weeks, we'd been seated at Jesus' feet on an unnamed mountain as he taught us about what it meant to be blessed. Today, we stand atop another high mountain to see Jesus transfigured before us, his face shining like the sun and his clothes dazzling white, as a voice from the clouds proclaim him the "Son, the Beloved, with whom [God] is well pleased." And then Wednesday marks the beginning of our forty-day journey through Lent, where we head to another mountain, a small hill called Golgotha, just outside the walls of Jerusalem, where Jesus will be crucified. And from there Matthew will bring us to one final mountain, a mountain in Galilee to which Jesus directed the disciples, from which he will send them to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything Jesus had commanded them. For Jesus will be with us always, to the end of the age."

Our theme for this Epiphany season has been seeing the light of Christ shining in our midst. And more specifically, what we will do with what we have seen. What we will do, who we

will be, how we will live, now that we have known ourselves to be blessed by God. And now, on this Sunday of the Transfiguration, we have one more chance to glimpse the glory, one more opportunity to stand in awe.

Six days later, our reading began, six days after Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah and Jesus responded with the first foretelling of his death, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and let them up a high mountain by themselves [where] he was transfigured before them.” This word transfigure is key because to transfigure is to transform into something more beautiful or elevated. So what Matthew is telling us is that on the top of this high mountain, on a place of elevation, Jesus revealed himself to his disciples as something different, something greater, than what they’d known him to be. This is true to form of how Jesus always displays himself on mountains. On the Sermon on the Mount, a great teacher. On the mount of Transfiguration, a dazzling figure. On Golgotha, great love. And on the mountain in Galilee, a great commission. Mountains are places where greatness is revealed.

This morning on this mountain we see Peter, James, and John respond in a way that I think pretty common in the face of greatness. Verse six spoke of how the disciples “fell on the ground and were overcome with fear.”

This is a bit of a jump here but stay with me, because I was thinking this week about the etymology of the word “awful.” Where did the word “awful” come from? Because if I say something is awful, that means it’s terrible, right? Something that is awful is bad or gross or

generally distasteful. But the word “awe” alone, is a feeling of reverential respect mixed with fear and wonder. If something is awesome, that thing is impressive or daunting.

Someone who is awestruck is filled with or revealing awe. So, because I’m a nerd, I dug into this a little bit. Turns out awful now means exclusively bad, unpleasant, or terrible. But it’s historical usage also included inspiring reverential wonder or fear. And even in modern colloquialisms, it can be simply a synonym for “very” as in, “the trip I took to Waldron on Wednesday to an awfully long time.” The bus trip wasn’t in and of itself awful. A little cold maybe, but more or less pleasant. But Waldron is basically Ohio, and that is a long time to be on a school bus.

All of this to say that the word “fear” in scripture is complex. When we hear the word fear, we think of being afraid, like how my basketball team felt when they got off the bus after spending the entirety of the aforementioned awfully long bus ride telling each other ghost stories. And one can certainly imagine the disciples experiencing that kind of fear from witnessing their friend and teacher start glowing and talking to dead people, while voices proclaimed stuff from clouds. If the clouds started talking to me, I’ll tell you what, I’d be afraid. But fear in scripture, especially fear of God, is less the knees knocking, bump in the night, don’t go in the basement sort of fear than it is a sense of awe. To fear God is to be faced with the glory and the power and the wonder of God. To understand a power that is awful in every sense of the word, sometimes terrible like an earthquake, sometimes transformative like transfiguration or forgiveness, sometimes amazing like a sunset or a mountain vista. But a power that is at the heart of it all grounded in the declaration that

rings from the river valley of the Jordan to the top of the highest peak to the cross to Galilee and to the world. The declaration of what it means to be God's beloved.

Which is why I think the heart of the Christian life is found not in verse six, but in verse seven. "But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid. And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone." We who have seen the power and the glory and the might, the love and the grace and the forgiveness of God, who have been reborn in the waters, fed at the table, and sent to "Go, make disciples, baptize, and teach," it is understandable, even appropriate that we might feel some fear at the weight and the responsibility of that task. We can fear this call, dear people of God, but we do not have to be afraid. Because as we will hear at the end of this book, there is a promise for the beginning of our journey. "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Amen.