

Standing up to Fear

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

Transfiguration Sunday

Matthew 17:1-9

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Lately, I've been paying more attention to the great breadth of emotions that we human creatures of God are capable of having. And, I think you'd agree, it's a pretty impressive range.

We can feel happy, or we can feel sad, or somewhere in the broad in between.

We are angry, or elated.

We feel attraction or disgust.

We are capable of feeling courage, or cowardice, or even fear.

All these emotions, and many more, at polar ends or maybe somewhere in the middle, a great range of intermediate emotions along a spectrum: we feel them, we experience them, sometimes we almost *are* them.

Let's talk about fear.

We know fear:

fear of change,
fear of failure;

fear of pain,
fear of shame;

fear of disapproval,
fear of discomfort,
fear of death.

We know fear:

it sickens;
it weakens;
it corrupts.

We know fear:

led by it, the good do what is wicked;
controlled by it, the honorable act against their ideals.

We know fear:

always with its reasons,
yet once it takes hold,
hardly ever reasonable or rational.

We know fear.

Our culture traffics in fear.
Politicians play on our fears.
Corporations seek to tap into our fear.

We know fear.

It is both a cause and a fuel of every human conflict.
It is the lock others are ever trying to pick.
It is the hidden motivation for so much that is ugly and wrong.

We know fear.

Are we able to know something else? *Anything* else? Are we able to resist, or even shrug off, the fear that would dominate us? Are we able to stand up to fear?



One day, Jesus took three of his closest followers on a hike up a mountain to pray. As far as Peter, James, and John were concerned, this was supposed to be just a little hike, some time away from the crowds so they could recharge their batteries. They'd go there, and they'd come back: tanned, rested, and ready.

Little did they know.

They went up that mountain, and, when they got to the top, but before they could even begin to enjoy the view, things got a little strange.

As they stood there, suddenly the disciples were amazed to see standing with Jesus, talking with him, both Moses and Elijah, the great prophets of God, both of whom at the end their lives had been taken up into heaven. Neither of them ever had a burial plot or tomb or shrine by which they could be remembered, as they were simply, mysteriously, miraculously, drawn from this life to that life, from this world to the next. But in that moment, they were on the mountain, with Jesus, standing with him, talking with him, as those three disciples looked on with wonder, with incomprehension, with fear.

Peter does what Peter does. He speaks up. Which is to say, that he blurts out,

speaking out of enthusiasm but also out of ignorance,
out of love — yes — but also out of fear.

Meaning, that he speaks nonsense.

Is it just me, or have any of you ever gotten nervous around someone, and then got all blabbery and hyper? You start saying things you wouldn't say if you were calm, and saying a lot more of it, too? It seems that this has happened to me more times than I can possibly count; perhaps I've done this even with a few of you. Sometimes, with some people, in some circumstances, our nerves push us into overdrive. And we blurt out the craziest stuff.

Peter was like a teenage boy at his first school dance right when he comes face to face with *her*. He was like the employee caught by the boss playing computer games. He blubbered and stammered, and the words that came out of his mouth were complete nonsense.

Of course, when you start down that road, you can either succumb to your nerves and sound like even more of doofus than you already feel you are, or you can make your crazy talk

sound like pearls of wisdom. As if to say, “I know what I’m talking about.” Because, some of us have learned, it’s not how confident you *feel*, it’s how confident you *sound*.

So Peter tries the confident approach: “Lord it is good that we’re here. Let me build some tents, one for each of you: a tent for Moses, a tent for Elijah, a tent for you. I can do that. Yes,... I can... do that.”

Interrupting his bluster, a cloud descended suddenly upon them. And then the disciples heard a voice — not from each other, nor from the three glowing holy men, but from that same cloud, a voice filling their ears, filling their very bones, pushing out from their lungs all remaining breath and from their hearts all remaining self-confidence, the voice of God saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!”

And in that moment, Peter and James and John knew fear unlike any they had ever known before. Terrified, they fell to the ground.

Now, a lot of people don’t really understand this. Not really. Oh, it’s not the voice making them afraid that they don’t get. Sure, that would make most anyone wiggy and weak in the knees. No, it’s the idea that God would inspire fear that many don’t get. Many don’t get how someone can be near to God, and yet be afraid. Maybe some of us are among them. Because for many, perhaps even for us, “God” and “fear” don’t go together, because “fear” and “love” don’t go together.

We’re supposed to love God, and God is supposed to love us. Right? An encounter with God is supposed to be a wonderful, happy thing. Isn’t it?

For sure, God is love. But God is also *holy*. And God’s holiness is a consuming fire that purifies the good by destroying the bad, a fire that enlightens but also judges, a fire that warms but also warns.

There are so many things that one could fear in life. But all such fears diminish in intensity and come to mean little in the face of the fear of God.

It says in the Old Testament, in a few places there, actually, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

The wise fear God and little else.

The foolish, it seems, fear many things except for God.

We live in fearful times.

We live in foolish times.



Peter and his friends had come near to God. And they were terrified, as well they should be.

Then it all turns around. Verse 7:

Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

Here, right here, is the *gospel*, the divine message of salvation, the healing word from God, the good news of the Lord Jesus:

Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

Jesus came to them: as they lay there in the dirt, shaking in fear.

Jesus touched them: a comforting touch, a healing touch, a touch full of blessing and mercy.

Jesus spoke to them: good words, helpful words, words to guide, to direct, to command.

“Get up,” he told them, so they would stand up, from the ground, from that posture of panic, from that state of fear.

“Don’t be afraid,” he told them, so they would leave their fear behind, leave it on the ground from which they were rising.

Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

Now I don’t think Jesus was telling them that they had no reason to be afraid. He wasn’t saying that their fear was silly. No, he was telling them that, because of him, they do not have to be incapacitated by fear of God. Because of him, they need not fear that their encounter with God will destroy them. Because of him, not only do they encounter the God who rightly inspires their holy fear, but they also, because of him, encounter the God who desires of them more than their fear.

And it is because of Jesus, the one who was with them, the one who had come to them and touched them and spoke to them. If it weren’t for him — his power, his holiness, his care, his love — there would be

no getting up,
no obeying,
no speaking,
no walking,
no renewing.

They would likely remain there groveling in the dirt.

Jesus told them to get up. But it was this very command, *his* command, that made their getting up possible.

It’s not as if Jesus is rejecting all that Moses and the Prophets and the Psalmist had said about the fear of God. The fear of God still *is* the beginning of wisdom. But that’s the thing: it is the *beginning*, not the *end*:

The God who rightly elicits fear and holy reverence does not will our end.
The God whose voice the disciples heard intends not our death but rather
our life.
The God who declares his love for his Son wills not our destruction but
instead our salvation.

Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

And so they stood up. Because Jesus made them able to stand up. But not only to stand up. Not only to get up and walk around. This was like

a mini-resurrection,
a foreshadowing of Christ's own rising from the dead,
an anticipatory and enacted parable of Easter,

as Christ by his word made them able to rise from a death-pose to a standing position of new life, new activity, new and renewed meaning and purpose.

And so Jesus made them able to stand up to all other fears. As Jesus lifted his disciples from the ground,

lifting them above the fear that had laid them low,
lifting them to an appropriate and life-affirming fear of the Almighty,

he was giving them perspective on all lesser fears. They were lifted above those fears, to stand up to them and face them and overcome them.



Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

Jesus comes to *us*, and touches *us*, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

Jesus comes to us.
We need to welcome him.

Jesus touches us.
We need to receive his healing touch.

Jesus speaks to us.
We need to listen.

"Get up. Do not be afraid."

Because so often we grovel in the dirt and wallow in our fear. Yet it's not a lively and holy fear of the Lord that has us quaking and shaking. Instead, it's a debilitating fear of beings and powers much less than God.

We're afraid of the unknown.
We're afraid of change.
We fear both notoriety and anonymity.
We fear both ignorance and knowledge.
We fear the scorn of colleagues and the criticism of bosses.
We fear poverty.
We fear war.
We fear death.
We live in fear.
Our lives are driven and riven by fear.

Yet, to us as well, Jesus gives the same healing commands. Get up. Don't be afraid. To us, as well, he gives what we need to get up and drop our debilitating fears.

He lifts us up.
He gets us moving.
He puts us to work.
He gives us a purpose.
He shows us we have no reason to fear.

Jesus comes to *us*, and touches *us*, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."
To us, Jesus speaks these resurrection words of command and comfort,

giving us a purpose,
giving us a share in his mission,
giving us a reason and the power to stand up to all fears
other than the holy and wise fear of God,
in which we find,
not death,
but life.

May the Holy Spirit, sent from the Father and the Son, give us the grace to embrace Christ's mission, of which he has given us a share, and to stand up to fear.