

*Genesis 12:1-4*

*Psalms 121*

*Romans 4:13-18*

*Matthew 17:1-9*

Sermon for Feb. 19, 2023

## **SPIRITUAL FEAR**

**By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo**

Summary: Arise, and do not be afraid.

The episode recounted in our gospel passage from Matthew today has in the passage of time come to be referred to as the Transfiguration. It is clearly something that the early Christian writers felt to be of central importance in Christ's ministry, as we see from the fact that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include it in their accounts, and Peter makes reference to it in one of his letters written many decades after. Although there are a few small differences in the three gospel accounts, the central elements remain the same: one evening Jesus takes three of his closest disciples – Peter, and the brothers James and John – with him to go up on a mountain to pray. Sometime during the night, the disciples are witness to a meeting and conversation taking place between Jesus and two of the greatest figures of Jewish history, Moses, the first and greatest of the lawgivers, and Elijah, the first and greatest of Biblical prophets. At some point, a cloud gathers around them, and God's voice speaks from the cloud, affirming that Jesus is God's beloved son, and that they should listen to him.

Mark and Luke, in their accounts, simply say that after the cloud had disappeared, the disciples found Jesus alone. But Matthew adds the interesting detail that, after God had spoken, the disciples fall down in fear and awe, and that Jesus then comes and helps them up, and tells them not to be afraid.

It's that last detail that Mathew adds that we'll talk about this morning.

If you think about fear, you see that fear seems to have two different categories. Just for the sake of convenience we can call them animal fear and spiritual fear.

Animal fear is the fear that has recognizable physical symptoms associated with it, the rapid heartbeat, the shortness of breath, the butterflies or sinking feeling in the stomach. An obvious example would be the fear of heights that most of us experience, or snakes, or the dark.

Some of you may be amused to hear that when I'm alone here in this church, I'm afraid to go downstairs. There are definitely things, evil things, behind the doors down there, things that walk down the stairs after you, things hiding in the furnace room. I'll go down there if it's absolutely necessary, but you can bet your life I don't linger, and I make sure the lights are on ahead of me. The fact is, I've always had this fear, even when I was just a boy, the fear of being alone in basements. It has always made my skin crawl, and the hair stand up on the back of my neck, and gives me a kind of queasiness in my guts.

Of course my mature intellect tells me this is all superstitious stuff and nonsense, but my ten year-old intellect told me the same thing, and nothing in the intervening decades has had any effect in reducing those animal reactions. So much for intellect, when it's in competition with our animal instincts.

Many people have the same sort of dread of public speaking, or boats, or flying. Our friend Kay Walter tells a funny story about how she has one of Marcy's albums recorded on her phone that she listens to whenever the plane takes off to calm her nerves, and how one time she didn't plug in the ear plugs properly so that the whole plane was serenaded by Marcy as they were moving down the runway.

I call this animal fear because it's mainly characterized by this visceral physical and emotional response, and clearly when Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid, he's not speaking about that kind of fear, even though, according to Matthew, they had fallen to the ground in shock and wonder. The reassurance Jesus was offering them wasn't that their stomachs would soon return to normal and the strength would come back to their legs.

What Jesus was referencing was the second kind of fear, what I've called spiritual fear. What do we mean by that?

These are fears that don't exist in our guts so much as they do in our imaginations, in our ability to visualize our own future. That's why animals don't have them, as far as we know.

We all have these fears, don't we? We have fears of failure, fears of impoverishment, fears of abandonment, of becoming helpless, and of course the fear of death.

If we put ourselves into the shoes of the three young men Jesus brought with him up that mountain, we can see that they had every reason to be afraid for themselves.

Just days before, Jesus had told them that they were on the way to Jerusalem now, and that there, he himself would meet his death. Where would that leave them?

They were being tasked and trained to carry on the ministry that Jesus had initiated, a handful of uneducated, unsophisticated, unprivileged young men, who would become responsible for carrying the word of truth out into the violent and hostile world.

Would they face impoverishment? Jesus had told them that, like him, they would have no place to lay their heads.

Would they face abandonment? Jesus had told them that those who do not hate their father and mother were not worthy to follow him.

Would they face failure? Jesus had warned them that people would curse them and persecute them and slander them, that they would be turned away from households and cities.

Would they face death? Jesus had told them that from now on "...brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death." (Matt. 10:20)

During the course of his three-year instruction of his disciples, the promises are few, but the warnings are many. Jesus asks them to give up their security, the security that had protected them from all these fears, and instead follow him.

These young men had the security of a rich and powerful tradition that was provided them by their Jewish faith. They had the law and the prophets that gave shape and security to every aspect of their lives, from birth to death. What they ate, how they dressed, what they did for a living, how they might behave, whom they should marry, how they should raise their children, where and how they should worship, what exactly they might expect from their society and their God....all these sources of security and assurance were provided to them by an inflexible tradition handed down from Moses and the other lawgivers, interpreted by Elijah and the other prophets. Yet it was all that security that Jesus was asking them to abandon.

And now think about what those young men saw on that mountain. They saw the two great pillars of their religion, Moses and Elijah, talking quietly with Jesus. In Luke's account of the incident, we're told that they heard Moses and Elijah discussing Jesus' exodus to Jerusalem. That's the word they used, exodus, and to the Jewish mind that carried only one meaning, the great adventure out of slavery and into freedom that stood at the very foundation of their nation.

And then those young disciples heard the very voice of God speaking to them out of the cloud, and saying what? Saying in effect: "Here is the old and here is the new. Here is the world with which you're familiar and comfortable, here is your tradition, here is your secure and safe way of life. But here, here, here is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him. Follow him. Trust in him."

And it is after that staggering experience that Jesus comes to them, lifts them up, dusts them off, and says: "You see? Whatever happens, however dark the night, however hopeless things seem, whenever you yearn for the old comforts and security, follow me. Though the whole world is against you, God is on our side. Whenever you feel most alone and abandoned, God is with us. Do not be afraid.

"Even of death, do not be afraid. You have seen Moses and Elijah today. You must always remember that ours is a God of the living, not the dead (Mark 12: 27), you must always remember that before Abraham was, I am (John 8: 58) Remember the daughter of Jairus, remember Lazarus. Remember that I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am, there may you be with me. (John 14: 1-3) So let not your hearts be troubled. ... neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,<sup>[a]</sup> neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, **39** neither height nor depth, nor

anything else in all creation, will be able to separate you from my love (Romans 8: 38-39)

Being a Christian, a follower of Jesus, means taking and acknowledging responsibility for one's own life. It means living with the reality that, however much we may be influenced by our past, we are not bound by it. Each day, each hour is new, and what we do and how we live in that hour is an expression of our freedom.

And that of course can be a dizzying, intimidating, and, yes, frightening realization. And that's why Jesus speaks to us, just as he did to those disciples, and says: "You are children of God. You are traveling to a better place, to a world of perfect freedom and perfect peace. I am giving you wings to fly, and I myself will be the wind beneath your wings. So arise, and do not be afraid."

And so our prayer, gracious God, is for a peaceful heart and an untroubled mind, even as we venture out into the world on the wings of love and faith, even as we leave behind our earthbound certainties and venture into the daily unknowns of humility and mercy and forgiveness, and even as we encounter worldly storms and turbulence, even as we venture into the endless unknown of each new day, grant us the courage and the peace of Christ, in whose name we pray.