

Overcoming the Fear of Letting Go

3rd Weekend in Lent – Color: Purple – February 26/27, 2005

Sermon Background Study

“For God did not give us a spirit of fear,
but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7)

Isaiah 41:8-10 (NRSV)

⁸But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
⁹you whom I took from the ends of the earth,
and called from its farthest corners,
saying to you, “You are my servant,
I have chosen you and not cast you off”;
¹⁰do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

Matthew 17:1-9 (NRSV)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

We like to be in control of our lives and, in some ways, we are. We can be kind to others or we can be indifferent. We can practice happiness or we can allow ourselves to slide into unhappiness. But sometimes, we are reminded that there is much in this life and in this world that we do not control. And that reminder can terrify us.

Peter and James and John had known each other for their whole lives. They had grown up in Capernaum, a small town on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. All three were fishermen and while they were working one morning, all three had been approached by a man from Nazareth named Jesus. “Follow me,” Jesus had said, “and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 4:19). And they had simply followed. All three of them.

Soon, the three of them were caught up in the enthusiasm of the crowds who came flocking to this new miracle-worker. As the months passed, and the miracles and the healings and the teachings mounted, the crowds began to wonder who Jesus really was. There was even speculation that perhaps Jesus was actually John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah. But Peter sensed that there was more to Jesus than even a great prophet. When confronted by Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?,” Peter had replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Peter had gotten it right. God had revealed this truth to him. (Matthew 16:13-20). Though Jesus had inexplicably told the disciples to keep this to themselves, Jesus as

The Transfiguration

Though there is a Transfiguration Sunday on the Christian calendar (it was February 6 this year), this event is largely ignored. Why? Perhaps we are not quite sure what to make of it. Was it a dream or vision of some kind? Jesus calls it a “vision” in verse 9, but then, how do three people share a vision? What would you or I have seen had we been nearby?

Perhaps, like Peter, we set our “mind not on divine things but on human things” (Matt. 16:23). Perhaps we too quickly race to questions about exactly what happened that day, trying to fit it into our own views of what can and cannot happen in this world. However, once we have accepted the truth of Jesus’ resurrection, we can see what happened on that mountainside for what it was, a revealing of Jesus’ glory that the disciples would not see again until the resurrection. Think of it as a foretaste of what is to come for the disciples, even though suffering, denial, and death must come first. In verse 9, Jesus even instructs the trio that they are to say nothing about what happened until the resurrection. Why? Because Jesus’ transfiguration can be understood only in the light of Easter.

Messiah was something the disciples could handle. The Jews had waited a long time for the arrival of God's Anointed One and all Jews *knew* the Messiah's job description – cleanse the temple and drive out the pagan foreigners. The Jews *knew* that the Messiah would come in power and might and wonder and glory for all the world to see. Even fishermen from Capernaum *knew* all this. They might be surprised to be a part of such big doings, but they had things under control. Or so they thought.

Rock my world!

How shocked and confused Peter and James and John must have been. No sooner had Peter declared Jesus to be God's Messiah then Jesus had begun talking about suffering, how he must die at the hands of the temple leadership and be raised on the third day. Peter and the others couldn't make sense of such talk. "Suffering Messiah" was an oxymoron – two words that simply didn't go together. The Messiah was to lead an army in triumph, not die on a Roman cross. Jesus had even called Peter "Satan" for suggesting that Jesus need not suffer.¹ Take up your cross, Jesus said. Those who want to save their life will lose it, those who lose their life for Jesus' sake will find it.

Then, Jesus led the three of them up a mountain in Galilee. There, Jesus was transfigured, *metamorphoomai* in the Greek. His face shone like the sun; his clothes dazzled. Alongside Jesus, Moses and Elijah appeared; the three of them talked amongst themselves. Nothing had prepared the disciples

A Theophany?

A theophany is a manifestation of God. A pillar of fire, a cloud, a burning bush, even a still, small voice (1 Kings 19:9-18). The cloud and the voice in the transfiguration story are theophanies. It is God made visible to our senses.

But Jesus' transfiguration is not a theophany. D. A. Hare speaks of the transfiguration as a "Christophany." Jesus' transfiguration is not about his divinity, it is about his Messiahship. Jesus stands alongside Moses and Elijah. No Jew would have considered either of them to be divine. Jesus is a transformed human in the transfiguration, but he is still human. Peter speaks to Jesus as he always did. It is not Jesus' transformed appearance that strikes fear in Peter and the others. They collapse only after the cloud and the voice.

This may seem rather unimportant to you. But this is one more example of how we can get off track unless we realize that no Jew of Jesus' day conceived of the Messiah as being divine. The Messiah might have been God's hand-picked #2, but the Messiah was to be human. When Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, he is not declaring Jesus to be divine. Our reading of the Gospels will be made much clearer if we keep this in mind.

for this. Perplexed at the least, Peter asks an odd question – can he build dwellings for the three?! But Peter is cut-off by a blinding light and a voice from the clouds saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"² The disciples world was being blown apart. They thought they understood, but they did not. They thought they had things under control, but they did not. In utter terror and confusion, Peter, James, and John simply collapse to the ground. Then, as any loving friend or parent would, Jesus comes to them, touches them, and tells them to get up, they need not be afraid. They could trust Jesus. They must.

It is a difficult thing to let go, to let God. We imagine that we are in control of every aspect of our lives, only to be confronted by the incomprehensible and unimaginable. Perhaps on the mountainside Peter was reminded of his own finiteness, and it scared him to his core. Perhaps he realized that his world was truly being turned upside-down and that he had little or no idea where it, or he, was headed. Regardless, Jesus told him to stand, to set aside his fears, and to draw comfort from Jesus' mere touch. In the same way, we can loosen our own grip on life's troubles and take Jesus' hand, trusting in his love, remembering that "all things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28).

Rushel Hawkey is the Custodial Supervisor at St. Andrew and is about as kind and caring a person as you could ever be blessed to know. I was struck recently by a t-shirt Rushel was wearing. It read:

"RELAX! God is in control." Amen.

¹Jesus knows the path that lies before him. The last thing he needs is Peter tempting him to take another path, to avoid the suffering that lies ahead. Jesus will be faithful all the way to the cross and it is by his faithfulness that we are saved.

²This repeats the words spoken to Jesus as his baptism (Matthew 3:17) with the addition of "Listen to him." The purpose of the Transfiguration is to point the disciples to Jesus' teaching, to the *word*. This incredible experience that Peter, James, and John share has value only if it leads them toward obedience to Jesus' teachings. If Jesus says he must suffer and die, then Peter and the others must accept that as the path forward. [from D. A. Hare's commentary on Matthew in the *Interpretation* series.]

Daily Bible Readings

(more on the events leading up to the transfiguration; psalms re God's control)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Matthew 4:18-22 Jesus calls his first disciples, including Peter, James, and John.</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 16:13-20 Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah (the <i>Anointed One</i>, the <i>Christ</i>)</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 16:21-28 The passages immediately preceding the transfiguration</p>	<p>Day 4 Psalm 104 God is Creator and Provider!</p>
<p>Day 5 Psalm 62 Power belongs to God. Trust in him alone.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Spring Bible Academy info and registration is now on-line!

Information on the Spring Bible Academy session is now available on-line. We have another great line-up of classes, including two women-only classes to be led by Rev. Kathryn Self. Classes include *Get a Life: Debunking the Six Myths in the Quest for Contentment* (with Rev. Self), *First Place: Bringing Balance to the Physical, Emotional, Spiritual and Mental* (with Rev. Self), *Christianity and Other Religions* (with Eric Roberson), *Acts: A New Spirit and a New World* (with Scott Engle), *Genesis: In the Beginning, God* (with Frankey Commer), *The Gospel of John - Part 2* (with Monty Moore), and *The Spirit-Filled Life* (with Scott Engle).

Most classes will begin the week after Easter, the week of March 28.

Please register early.

To learn more and to register, simply go to www.standrewccl.org

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by reading back over Matthew's transfiguration story. What are three things in the story that surprise you? . . . Describe your own mental picture of the transformed Jesus. In this picture, is Jesus standing on the ground or "floating" in the air? How about Elijah and Moses - where are they? What does Matthew say? . . . Why might Jesus have been talking to Elijah and Moses? Why might Matthew give us this little detail? . . . Why Elijah and Moses and not someone else? . . . Why do you think the disciples become frightened only when the voice comes from the clouds and not when Jesus was transformed? . . . Why do you think Jesus tells the disciples to say nothing until after Jesus' resurrection?
2. Do you think the disciples' terror is due only to the voice from the heavens? What else could they be frightened of? I've always thought of Peter as being a pretty strong, dynamic, and control-oriented person. Do you think that he might have "control issues?" What does this story have to say about our own need to control? What do you think the Bible has to say about our "control issues?" You might share some stories of times in your life that your lack of control was driven home to you. How did this make you feel? How could a strong need to control lead to fear? How do we strike the balance between living as if we have no control over ourselves or our lives and living as if we can control everything? What does it really mean to "let go and let God?"