



How Jesus Dealt with the Disciples' Fear

Transfiguration Sunday

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Mark 9:2-10 *And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. ⁵And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." ⁸And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. ⁹And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean.*

Fear is a powerful God-given emotion that is meant to protect and defend us, but living in fear will harm and destroy us. Fear releases adrenaline and the body's reaction is flight or fight. We run or we engage. When I was serving in Huntington Beach, I experienced three major earthquakes. One occurred during Sunday morning worship. The cross began to shake violently like it was going to detach itself from the wall. The floor was moving like the waves on the ocean. The beams overhead twisted and creaked. It took only a moment for everyone to realize what we were experiencing and the fear response was triggered. Mothers and fathers ran for their children in the nursery and Sunday school classrooms. Many ducked for cover under the pews and staked out my spot under the altar. In Ohio we taught our children to stop, drop and roll in case of fire. In California they had to learn to duck, dodge and hide until the earthquake was over.

Everyone has experienced a moment of fear, but in our world more and more people are living in fear. We are concerned about terrorists, political struggles, the economy, persecution, pensions, health care, employment, violence and immorality. The list of phobias continues to expand. What are you afraid of? Fear causes us to withdraw and engage in self-protection. The distrust it brings undermines our relationships. Fear makes us more pessimistic, negative in our attitudes, unhappy in our disposition. Fear affects our health, our appetite, our sleep. Prolonged fear results in anxiety and depression. It paralyzes the will and clouds our mind. If fear remains, our response is often helplessness and hopelessness. Is it any wonder suicide rates continue to climb? All fear is connected to survival and therefore connected to our ultimate fear, death and dying.

The Church is not exempt. Fear can be equally destructive for the Body of Christ. Where fear abounds the faithful are more concerned with survival than with mission. We retreat instead of advance. Where fear moves in conflict follows. When fear occupies us, joy, peace, power and all the other gifts of the spirit dissipate. We feel like spiritual failures. The fear and foreboding produces the same anxiety and depression in pastors and other church leaders. (Has anyone here experienced that?)

How are you dealing with your fear? In the Transfiguration, Jesus is addressing this issue for his disciples, the first followers and those of us gathered here. Jesus offered them powerful insight, revelation, and a transformed worldview that renewed, strengthen and revived their hope.

We will get to that in a moment but first let us pray....

In order to put the Transfiguration in its context, let us examine what comes before it, beginning in Mark 8:27+. Jesus had been revealing His nature and identity in His preaching, teaching, healing and miracles. He gives them a simple two-question test: "Who do people say that I am?" You remember their response, "Some say Elijah, John the Baptist or one of the prophets." Then Jesus asks, "And what about you, who do you say that I am?" Peter gets it right. He says, "You are the Christ, the Messiah!" It must have been obvious that He was making progress with these followers. But they still did not have a clear picture of the mission of the Messiah. Jesus wants them to understand even more deeply the nature of the Messiah and His future. In verse 31 Mark reminds us. "And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.³² And he said this plainly." This one they had come to serve is going to suffer and die! Can you feel the fear beginning to rise in that gathering? At this point in the flight or fight response, Peter is ready to fight. (His flight response comes a little later.) He takes control, pulls Jesus aside and rebukes Him. Perhaps he told Jesus that his words were making them afraid or perhaps he told Jesus they would fight and prevent this from happening. Put yourself in the place of one of these disciples (as you should, because you are). They have to be wondering if there is a suffering and a cross on the horizon for Jesus. Because we are following Jesus, what is on the horizon for us?

It didn't take but a moment to set the record straight. Jesus rebukes Peter for not seeing or thinking clearly. He was only concerned about the things of man and not the things of God. If you follow Jesus you must deny yourself and take up the cross. If you try to save your life you will lose it, but if you give your life for His sake and the Gospel you will save it. What good is it to gain the world and forfeit your soul? Have you ever taken time to sit and contemplate those verses for more than a few minutes? If we take them seriously then our neat little plans for our life and our retirement seem far less certain. How do you approach suffering and the cross and not be overwhelmed by fear?

This is why the Transfiguration is so important! Gemechis and I just returned from India. We were preaching, teaching and praying with those who are going forward in the direction of suffering and a cross. They are moving out into the midst of radical Hindus and Muslims to begin sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ and starting house churches. Their lives have already been threatened. Churches were burned in Bangalore. Church property destroyed in Delhi. Pastors have been beaten and the lives of those who come to faith in Jesus have been dispossessed by their family and friends. In spite of the fear, their faith grows and their witness becomes even bolder. I found myself asking, “What do they have that we need so that we too might advance the Gospel with such selfless commitment?” We need what the Transfiguration provides: power, insight, revelation and a transformed worldview. They have trusted the promise Jesus made in the first verse of chapter 9, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.” They are less concerned about preserving their own power and control and far more concerned about the powerful presence of Jesus and the work of His Holy Spirit.

Our Transfiguration text is primarily a description of an experience with Jesus. There are just a few words of dialog. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on a mountain by themselves. Peter, James and John are often considered as the inner circle of disciples. In fact, there are only three occasions where they are singled out to be alone with Jesus away from the other disciples: 1) The raising of Jairus’ daughter; 2) the Transfiguration; and 3) the Garden of Gethsemane. It is interesting that in each of these instances, death is a focus. Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter from death to life. On that occasion he showed them that the power of death was no match for His power. If Jesus could give life to her He could give life to them! The Transfiguration was the watershed when Jesus began to speak openly about his death. We’ve already said that this would have shocked the disciples and shaken their confidence in him as Messiah. But in the Transfiguration they see that, even with imminent death looming, Jesus is glorified. Even in death the glory of God would not be stopped but be revealed more fully than ever before. Then we have the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is preparing to die. It is where he is wrestling with thoughts of the agony that awaited him and where he surrendered to death.

He takes them to the top of the mountain and it simply says, “there He was transfigured.” In that moment, Chrysostom writes, “He disclosed, it is said, a glimpse of the Godhead. He manifested to them the God who was dwelling among them.” They saw Jesus for who He is. He revealed who he was in His power and glory.

They saw his clothes become brighter than the sun, whiter than the snow. Chrysostom also writes that these words don’t do justice to what the disciples were experiencing. This brilliance and purity may be compared to the sun and snow only because we have no other words to express it. We know it must have been far more than that, because the disciples fell on their knees as a

result of what they saw. They saw the purity and inexpressible majesty of Jesus that stood in sharp contrast to their own sinful and powerless lives. Heaven had broken in on their world. While Mark focuses in many ways on the humanity of Jesus, in this text he wants us to know with absolute certainty that Jesus is the Son of God. Suffering and the cross are not his ultimate destiny. His ultimate destiny is to be glorified. It is not only a preview of His resurrection but of His return. It is a preview of the full establishment of His kingdom.

When the disciples look to Jesus, in the light they can see two others, Moses and Elijah: Moses, the law-giver and Elijah, the prophet of prophets. Perhaps pointing to Jesus as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Mark simply tells us they are talking with Jesus. Other Gospel writers tell us they were talking about his suffering and death. Chrysostom also provides another powerful insight. “For both the one and the other had courageously withstood a tyrant: one the Egyptian, the other Ahab; and this on behalf of a people who were both ungrateful and disobedient.” Soon Jesus would be facing leaders of the vast Roman Empire.

Peter’s response to this is to say, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here, let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” Peter was no longer overcome by the fear for Jesus’ life or his own. At that moment, in the presence of Jesus, he just wanted to remain in the comfort and power of His glory. Yet Peter’s idea is still proof that he does not fully understand what Jesus is revealing. Jerome writes that because Jesus had not yet given His life for Peter, he did not fully comprehend the truth. Three tents of equal status would not do justice to what Jesus revealed and what the Father is about to confirm.

The cloud rolls in and surrounds them and they hear the voice of the Father say, “This is my beloved Son, listen to Him.” We hear these words from the Father at His Baptism. We hear them again as Jesus approaches the end of his earthly ministry. Ambrose adds, “He declared him in his passion, when the sun hid itself, and sea and earth trembled. He declared him in the centurion, who said, ‘Truly this was the Son of God.’”

There are three present. Two are servants but only one is the Lord. Only one is the Son. Augustine says, “The voice did not say: ‘These are my beloved sons.’ For One only is the Son; others are adopted. It is Jesus that is commended to them: He from whom the law and prophets derive their glory.” There are no equals; there is no other son, no other source of salvation. Jesus is all there is. (The Transfiguration flies in the face of Universalists.)

Just as suddenly as it all began, it was over. The cloud was gone, the voice silent, and only Jesus is there with them. They begin the journey down the mountain and Jesus knows that they cannot possibly fully understand what they have just experienced. It would not be completely clear until later. I don’t know about you, but I have found that when I have not fully understood something it is better to remain silent and contemplate it further, to let it soak before I speak. Even so, Jesus

told them to remain silent. However, He did not tell them they should never tell anyone, but that they should wait until he had risen from the dead. Then these words before us today in the Transfiguration text would make sense. Then their words of hope will have even greater power and strength in helping others overcome their fears.

In the experience of the Transfiguration Jesus overwhelmed their fear with power, insight and revelation. The Transfiguration helped to transform their worldview. They left that mountain renewed, strengthened and filled with hope. They experienced the power of Jesus' presence. They received insight into Jesus' mission and purpose as Messiah. The Father revealed Jesus as His Son. They were forced to adapt their worldview to include a spiritual reality that was more real than what they referred to as reality. Death was not the end of things but the beginning. Death would have no power over them, nor would the fear of death prevent them from following Jesus faithfully and fulfilling His mission.

How does our ministry help people to deal with fears that overwhelm and destroy even today? I would suggest that the primary way we invite people into a Transfiguration experience is worship. Let me make three quick points.

When we worship we come into the presence of Jesus. We begin in His name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are gathered into His presence, making visible His power that forgives, redeems, saves and transforms our life. His power is manifest in the Word read and proclaimed. His powerful presence comes to us in the sacraments, in the water, bread and wine of Baptism and the Eucharist. In those moments heaven breaks into our earthly experience. How often we fail to see and hear what Jesus is doing in our midst! I am convinced that is just as true for clergy as laity in our congregations. Consistent, faith-filled worship where Jesus in all His glory is manifest overcomes fear and brings renewal and hope.

Second, the heart of genuine worship is surrender. We surrender in confession, the offering, preparing to hear the Gospel, "Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life." That is what Peter and James and John did as they experienced the awesome power of Jesus unveiled and moving in their midst. True worship happens when we give ourselves completely to Jesus. True worship is what Jesus told his disciples to do: deny self, take up the cross, dying to self and yielding to the Spirit. This is what it means to offer our self. In this Transfiguration experience the disciples realized that had nothing to fear in offering themselves for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus. They learned that they could trust Jesus completely. The supreme example of self-surrender is Jesus. The night before his crucifixion Jesus surrendered Himself to God's plan. He prayed, "Father your will not mine." Surrender is not easy. It is intense warfare against our self-centered nature. The Bible is filled with the stories of how God used the people who were willing to surrender their lives for his purposes. Many of those circumstances were dangerous, difficult and fear-filled. What they discovered is that victory comes through

surrender. Surrender doesn't weaken you; it strengthens you. What I have learned in my own life is that if you don't surrender to Jesus, you surrender to chaos.

Third, worship is about submission. We submit as we hear the Word of God read and proclaimed. We submit as we confess our faith in the Creed. Submission, as the voice of God in our text indicates is best demonstrated by listening to Jesus, obedience. We can't truly worship Jesus if we say "No" to His Word and His will and neglect his teaching for our lives. Submission means admitting our limitations. In offering to build a tent, Peter was acknowledging his limitation. He had no idea how else to respond. When we admit our limitations, we give up our feeble sense of control and give Jesus space to work in our lives. One of those other important lessons I have learned in my life is that I cannot fulfill God's purposes in my life if I keep my focus on my own plans. That's why Luther writes about dying daily. If Jesus is going to do His deepest work in our lives then we must submit to him our past regrets, present problems, future ambitions, our fears, dreams, weaknesses, habits, hurts and hangups. We do so with the confidence that nothing under His control is ever out of control. In the bread and wine He is truly and completely present. In His humility and His glory He enters our early existence with His heavenly presence. His presence will never let us be dominated or possessed by our fears.

Those disciples never forgot their experience on that mountain with Jesus. It was a constant resource for them.

1 Pet 1:16-18 — *We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.*¹⁷ *For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*¹⁸ *We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.*

John 1:14 — *We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

It is my prayer that our worship experience offers us—and those we serve—this same Transfiguration experience every time we gather together. This is the only way to self-denial and cross bearing, the only way to follow Jesus.

In the name of Jesus.