

Get Up. Do Not Be Afraid.
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Matthew 17:1-9

What a story! Four men climb a mountain. And when they reach the top, one of these men is so in tune with the divine that God's presence is manifested right then and right there. It's as if Mt. Sinai in the Exodus had been recreated some 1,500 years later. The ground shakes, and a mighty cloud blinds them, and God's voice thunders: "This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to Him." And all of a sudden Jesus has a George Hamilton tan, and his clothes are a dazzling white. And wouldn't you know it, Moses and Elijah – the Beyoncé and Jay Z of the Hebrew Bible -- they are both standing there with him. You know something's important when those two show up! They called it the Transfiguration.

And that transfiguration is something alright. Truth be told it's one of the seminal moments in all of scripture. It is unbelievable. And unexplainable. And miraculous.

But as miraculous as the transfiguration is, it's not the part of the lection that I want to focus on this morning. And besides, Matthew's version of the events will come back around in three years, and I can talk about it then.

Instead, I want to talk about what Jesus does after this transfiguration. The text tells us that upon hearing the voice of God, Peter, James and John are terrified. They fall to the ground, unsure of what's unfolding. Just like those Israelites on Mt. Sinai, they are not prepared to encounter face to face the raw, untamed energy of God. And so they tremble. And they shake. And they fall to the ground in fear. And they close their eyes. And they hold on tight and pray the world will stop spinning so fast.

But suddenly, something shakes them from their stupor. Each one feels a gentle touch on his shoulders, a calming touch. And each man looks up into the face of Jesus. The chaos ceases. The cloud lifts. The earth stills. The prophets vanish. There is silence. But it's not an empty silence. It's a full one. And in the presence of Jesus there is peace. And there is this unmistakable sense of wholeness. And it's as if God raging power has been transferred and translated into the gentle touch of a familiar friend.

And with Elijah, we remember, God's voice is not in a screaming wind, nor in a shaking earthquake, nor in a raging fire, but rather, God's still small voice is in the silence. And in the stillness, the silence breaks, and Jesus says, "Get up, and do not be afraid." And so they stood up. And they were no longer afraid.

And there on that mountain, Peter and James and John received a glimpse of God. But only a glimpse. They would still have to travel down that mountain, and into Jerusalem, and to a trial, and a cross, and death, and into a resurrection, and into the founding of a new church. And next week, we'll begin that journey with them.

But just for a moment, let's linger on the mountain, in the presence of God, in the silence of God, in the hands and arms of God, in the mystery of God, in the magnificence of God, in the gentleness of God. I think it is here in this moment that the disciples were steeled for what would come next. I think it's because of this place and this story, that the disciples were able to manifest their powers at Pentecost; they were able to heal crippled souls who would walk and leap and praise their way to the temple; and they were able to endure the persecution that would await them as they spread the Gospel message to

new lands. It was on that mountain, that for the very first time, the disciples really, truly grasped the power of caring touches and caring words. And caring touches and caring words would become a staple of their church.

For thousands of years, the laying on of hands has been a ritual of ordination for deacons and pastors. Congregations assemble around a person, and they lay hands on their head or shoulder, and they whisper words of affirmation. The good deacons and the good ministers remember such affirmation. At some point, every minister will face adversity – earthquakes of grief or conflict or other traumas will shake the foundations of their ministries. But when they harken back to the memories of ordination, they remember the gentle hands and encouraging words of persons who told them: “You are prepared, and you are called, and you are loved. So stand up. And do not be afraid.”

And then there are the exceptional ministers. They are the ones that realize they too have gentle hands and calming voices – and they know that they must use them. For 18 years, our congregation has known the gentle touch and calming voice of Tillie Duncan. And I don’t know about a transfiguration, but she is certainly dazzling. And she has certainly dazzled us. Through Tillie, we have come to know a God whose power is neither calamitous nor cantankerous, stingy nor stubborn, distant nor cold. Instead, we have met a God who loves us consistently, gently, and joyfully.

And to me, that’s the remarkable thing about the Transfiguration. Who cares how much the mountain shook? And who cares how windy it was? And who cares what appearance Jesus took on? And who really cares if Moses and Elijah were there to witness it?

To wonder about such things is to miss the real transfiguration. Up there on that mountain, God’s theophanies were no longer bound to supernatural acts: God didn’t have to appear as a burning bush, or as a cloud or as fire or as some mysterious wrestler in the night. God could appear in the face of one like you and me. And God did! In the person of Jesus! And right then and right there, God’s delivery system was transformed for the better.

Tillie and so many others, have followed in that apostolic line. They have realized that just like Jesus, they too could use their hands and their voices to convey the love of God in the present.

And now the hands and voices of all the saints of old gently nudge us, and call out to us: “Get up. Do not be afraid.”

Friends, we have hands. And we have voices. Let’s use them. And even in the midst of a tumultuous world, let’s use them to make God’s love apparent to all our neighbors.

May it be so.

Amen.

