

When Everything Comes into Focus

Matthew 17: 1-8

Transfiguration of the Lord/ 3rd February 2008

There are moments when everything comes into focus, when everything becomes perfectly clear, moments of searing insight and brilliance which change everything. I once was blind, but now I see, *I see* – and nothing, no one will ever look the same again. We thought we knew who Jesus was, we thought we had him figured out, but here on this holy mountain, we come to see who he really is. The sight of his transfiguration transfigures our eyes and thoughts, our ears and our hearts. For the core of his being shone through the radiance of his face and he became dazzling, like a flame, with the intensity of pure, white, blinding light. In the midst of the cloud overshadowing Jesus, we hear a voice, “This is my Son, my Beloved; with him I am well pleased: listen to him!” A voice that threw the disciples to the ground, overcome by fear. Then Jesus goes over and touches, *touches* them – *in* their fear – and said, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

Three imperatives. One from God – “Listen to him” meaning the Son. And from the Son, these two encouraging, compassionate commands, “Get up,” followed by “do not be afraid.” Of all the times I’ve read or preached on this text, I’ve always focused upon God’s command, “Listen to him.” But this week, something else hit me. After reading a particular text during Bible, I tend to ask this question: “So, what struck you in this text?” How did the Word strike your heart, move your spirit, speak to you? It’s always fascinating to see how the Spirit moves through us through a text. This week, what struck me were these words: “Get up.” “Do not be afraid.”

But why were they afraid? Wouldn’t you be? I would. The natural response to the glory of God’s presence is fear. We can call it holy awe, if it makes us feel better, yet there is still a sense of fear – more like ego-shock, perhaps, an awareness of someone completely Other, an overwhelming Other before whose presence we know we have no right to stand on our own, and so we fall down on our knees and cover our faces before the Holy of Holies.

When God moves in our lives it *can* be a fearful thing (which is why we resist God, but not for long). It’s fearful because facing God inevitably *costs* us something, namely our control over reality and our lives. Get mixed up with this God and you discover there’s more going on in the world than what meets the eye (and why our sight always need transfiguring). It’s fearful because this God might actually ask me to

do something that's simply too big for me to do, to become someone I know I'm not on my own, to go somewhere I would rather not go, that doesn't appear safe, to embark on a journey that we would probably prefer not to take. To encounter God means fundamentally that our lives will change, they will be different. They have to change. If we don't then it's probably safe to say you haven't encountered God. Kierkegaard (1813-1855) said, "Once you wise up, you can't dummy down." For after encountering the presence of God in the face of Jesus Christ how can you go back to normalcy? What is normal after that?

Being normal (which Presbyterians like to do), safe, or secure have nothing to do with being a disciple – and this text on the Sunday before the beginning of Lent is all about what it means to be a disciple, a student in the school of Jesus, a follower of Jesus Christ. Fear is never the ultimate reality for the disciple; we are called to live beyond fear – and that's tricky. Being a disciple isn't easy, it's very difficult. To follow inevitably involves a cost. Therefore, it requires courage – courage to *see*, to look at, to acknowledge the radiance of God in the face of Jesus Christ -- and not deny it – and then live with all of its life-changing ramifications.¹

How do we get the courage to step out and live as if God is really *God*, that Christ is Lord of our lives, and to listen to him, that this world and our lives within it belong not to ourselves, but to him – in order that our lives might be used by him for the glory of God, which is really what our souls long for more than anything else. Courage. In a speech given in 1922 at St. Andrews University, J. M. Barrie (1860-1937), of *Peter Pan* fame, said to a generation of youth disillusioned after the Great War, "Courage is the thing. All goes if courage goes."² Do we have the courage to listen, to really be disciples, to go where he leads?

No. We don't. Courage to be a *disciple*? No, we don't. On our own, we don't. If we have to trust our own inner resources to try to dredge up courage, then this is just a kind of works righteousness, trying to earn our salvation, acting as if God had nothing to do with it all, relying only on *ourselves* – that's a horrifying way to live a life.

But Jesus went over to his disciples *in* their fear and trepidation and touched them and said, "Get up." "Get up." "Get up and do not be afraid." *Fear not.*

¹ Cf. quotation from the worship bulletin: "...the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?" Reverend John Ames in Marilynne Robinson's, *Gilead: A Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2004), 245.

² J. M. Barrie, *Courage*. The Rectorial Address delivered at St. Andrew's University, May 3, 1922. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 40.

Get up and follow, free from binding fear because the Lord of love has touched you and assures you that you can. Get up and follow, beyond the bounds of fear because his grace summons us to do so. And the one who commands also equips us with the courage to follow. *Get up and not be afraid because it's the Lord who tells us so – and he can be trusted.*

It's the same Lord who invites us to come to his table. Set your fear aside, share the bread of grace and drink the cup of courage, that allow us to listen to him and to follow wherever he leads.

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