

Facing Fear with Faith

Matthew 17:1-9

The Last Sunday after Epiphany/Transfiguration

Feb. 19, 2023

Kyle Childress

Some time ago I was with old friends, and we had begun sharing our nightmares. We pastors have amazingly similar nightmares. Most of them are variations on having to preach and we can't find our sermon, can't get to the church, or can't find our clothes, and we are running out of time. Bad dreams of anxiety and panic.

Soon our conversation shifted to talking about our fears and how they've changed from when we were young. When in high school our biggest fear was the big game, opening night of the high school play, or maybe the fear of calling a girl for the first time. But our fears have changed over the years. Now fears have to do health and medical concerns, and issues related to taking care of our families. One theologian friend of mine confessed to me a long time ago that he was not afraid of death. He was afraid of dying. That whole process of living in hospitals and nursing homes, living on medications and endless doctor appointments was a source of great fear.

The theologian Paul Tillich wrote about the three dimensions of anxiety. Human beings, Tillich noted, must confront the anxiety of nonbeing (death), the anxiety of meaninglessness (unpredictability) and the anxiety of fate (uncertainty). Unpredictability and uncertainty seem to be a prominent part of our lives today, no matter how old or young we are. Many of today's politicians' entire career are built upon capitalizing on our fears and anxieties of unpredictability and uncertainty.

I know that technically fear and anxiety are distinct from each other and are even believed to travel along different neurological circuits in the brain. Fear has an object; anxiety is free-floating, a kind of generic dread. But they are close relatives, both warning us of threats.

Both are tell-tale signs of feeling that what we love the most is threatened. For our purposes this morning I'm going to simply refer to both under the heading of "fear." Fear is a wake-up call. It arouses awareness of danger; it puts us on high alert. Yet it can also do just the opposite, overwhelming us and diminishing our alertness. If fear continues, tunnel vision occurs. Fear takes over, overwhelming the imaginative capacities and advanced reasoning. We become locked into the present and lose the ability to envision something other than what is now threatening. We become paralyzed.

Perhaps that is why there are more than 300 references to fear in the Old and New Testaments. A wide range of emotions are captured in the Hebrew and Greek words for *fear*, from a sense of awe and immense respect to heart-pounding fright. From the Psalms to the prophets, to angels, the Bible is full of the admonition "Do not be afraid!" or in the good old words of the King James Bible, "Fear not!" Most always the admonition is to help us envision something other than what is now threatening. Some things we should rightly fear but perhaps we fear in the wrong way or for the wrong reason. Most of the time, "fear not" in the Bible is to help us put fear in perspective, and we definitely need to put fear in perspective.

I was visiting at someone's house some years ago and the television was on the Weather Channel. There was a growing tropical storm which would soon become a hurricane somewhere in the world, but nowhere near Texas. Nevertheless, the announcer spoke with a voice heightened by anxiety and alarm.

On the nearby table the person I was visiting had a pistol. I asked him, “Why do you have a pistol out?” Almost shouting over the announcer, he said, “When the hurricane comes the looters and rioters will take over the streets and break into our houses. I want to be ready.”

We need perspective on our fears. Biblical perspective. Or as I often counsel many of you, as well as counsel myself, we want to learn to trust God more than we trust our fears.

Today’s story of the Transfiguration, the disciples are afraid, and well they should be. We are at a critical turning point in Matthew. In the chapter before, Peter makes the great confession at Caesarea Philippi, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God (Matt. 16:16). Peter is full of adrenalin, the disciples are excited, but then Jesus starts talking about suffering and death on the cross, and Peter and the rest don’t want to hear it, and they don’t understand it.

Jesus is facing the cross. He knows it’s coming. He faces torture and death, but he is also confronting the systemic powers of Evil, Sin, and Death. He will be walking into the very essence of Darkness, which is preparing to throw everything in Evil’s power at him. He will take on the full brunt of Evil: pure hate, rage, violence, and total darkness. He will receive it all, absorb it on the cross, and it will kill him dead.

Jesus knows one way or another what’s coming. And this is when he takes Peter, James, and John, the disciples’ inner circle, up on a mountain. And there Jesus is Transfigured – his face, his body, his clothes grow bright, not because of some reflection, but by some inner light shining forth from who he is. Jesus, the Christ, is the Light that is the source of all other lights.

Suddenly Moses and Elijah show up and start having a conversation with Jesus. Moses – the great lawgiver and Elijah – the greatest prophet in conversation with Jesus. Facing death and darkness, Jesus seeks counsel from two of the most important people in Israel’s history, the two biggest names in the Old Testament. But in the middle of this conversation of the ages, Peter interrupts, butts in. (I pause, to ask an obvious question – if Jesus is shining brightly and the two greatest figures of the Jewish tradition appear and start talking with Jesus, how do you have the impertinence to butt in and say something?) Peter says, “Lord, this is great. Let’s put up three tents and stay awhile – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

As an answer, a massive bright cloud overshadows everything and everyone, and from within the cloud a voice says, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him!” Or, in our own language of today, “This is my beloved Son; shut-up and listen!”

With that answer, all three disciples fall to the ground overcome with fear.

Pay attention to what happens next. Verse 7 says, “But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’” Then the story goes on to say that when the disciples looked up, they saw no one except Jesus alone.

This short, simple little verse 7 tells us what Jesus does about fear. The first thing it says, “Jesus came.” Jesus comes to the disciples. He does not shout from over where he is standing. He does not criticize, or ridicule and he doesn’t trivialize, “Hey, disciples quit groveling, it’s just Moses and Elijah. What’s the big deal? Quit acting like babies.” No, Jesus comes to them. He initiates, makes the first move. He comes to us across the distance we feel between us and God. He comes to us in our fear.

He sees us afraid, and he walks across the room, he comes to us in the middle of the night, he stands beside us as we go into surgery, he walks with us down the hall of the nursing home, he comes and sits with us on the porch and in our sitting room. He doesn't wait on us; he comes to us. When we are paralyzed with fear, he comes to us.

But the story keeps on. Jesus, who touched the leper in chap. 8:3, who shortly thereafter touches the hand of the fevered woman in v. 8:15, who touched the eyes of two blind men in 9:29, now comes to Peter, James, and John and touches them.

When I was little and home sick, I have clear memories of my mother touching my forehead checking my fever, and both my mother and grandmother patting on me. And we know touching and patting on babies is a source of great comfort, for both the babies and for us.

Jane and I were standing in a long line after a funeral for the child of dear friends. As we got closer to our friends we worried, what would we say, what would we do? But when the moment came and Jane came to our old friend, the father, they both just fell into each other's arms, embracing, hugging, and crying. There was nothing else to say or do. The only thing to do was touch.

Touch is one of the greatest gifts of God. It can be a conduit of empowerment, of love, of healing, and great encouragement. It's partly why we "pass the peace" and why we hold hands for our benediction. It's why we often pat each other on the shoulder and shake hands. All of us need to know that often the most important thing we do in ministry will not be what we say but the way we touch, the way we hug and embrace when people are afraid. But like all good gifts of God, we human beings can easily abuse the gift. And when abused and misused,

the hurt and pain goes deep. There is much power in this gift of touch, so we pay attention to appropriate ways of touching, ways that heal and not hurt, ways that bring love, and not fear.

On the mountain, Jesus touched each of the disciples before he said a single word. He came to them in their fear and held them by touching them.

Only then does he speak.

Jesus says, “Get up.” This is interesting. The disciples are obviously still afraid, but Jesus says to them, commands them in the imperative, “Get up.” Frightened or not, it is time to get up. Don’t wait until you are no longer afraid but get up now, even in the midst of fear.

Part of this is disciples getting their fear in perspective. They are not threatened, at least, not now. Yes, there are rough times coming and some immense challenges down the road. The way of the cross beckons for all of them. But get up. We can face this together; we can face this with the Living Christ beside us, but we cannot face this with our face on the ground. Jesus says, “Get up.”

Most of us know that both the classical and Christian teaching on the virtue of courage is that courage is about going on in the face of fear, not waiting for the fear to pass or that we will suddenly no longer fear. Courage is getting up, facing the fear, and going on. But notice that this is only after Jesus has come to us and touched us. Only then does he say, “Okay. It’s time to get up.” We are not by ourselves when we are commanded to get up. Christ is with us, even helping us up.

Finally, Jesus says, “Fear not.” “Don’t be afraid.” With what has just happened, perhaps this hardly needs to be said. Jesus came to them, touches them, and takes them by the hand, and raises them to their feet. No longer with their

faces buried in the dirt, they are helped up, with the hand of the Living Christ. The very One who is the Word made flesh that begat all other words. He is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and End. For one brief, bright shining moment, these three disciples have seen what St. Augustine called, the “wondrous depth” of who Jesus truly is. The Messiah, the Son of the Living God, is there beside them, encouraging them, helping them, restoring their trust. They can trust the living God more than they trust their fears. They no longer have to fear.

You know this one verse is a microcosm of the entire gospel. Jesus Christ comes to us in his incarnation. He touches us in teaching and healing ministry. And then through the cross, the resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we are empowered to get up and not be afraid.

Furthermore, it is through this same Living Christ by way of the Holy Spirit, that we are part of the Body of Christ, the church, so that we can come to one another, touch, hold hands, and hug and pat each other on the shoulder. We can share courage so that we will get up, and with the Living Christ, we can walk beside one another.

Henri Nouwen, the late spiritual writer, and great teacher of prayer, says he received the greatest revelation about faith and trust at, of all places, the circus. Nouwen went to see the German trapeze group “The Flying Rodleights” perform. He was mesmerized by their breath-taking performance as they flew gracefully through the air. At the end of the show, he spoke with the leader of the troupe, Rodleigh himself. Nouwen asked him how he was able to perform with such grace and ease so high in the air. Rodleigh responded, “The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher...The secret is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to

Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me. The worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher. I'm not supposed to catch Joe. It's Joe's task to catch me" (Henri Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life*, pp.195-196).

In our fear, so often we think our job is to grab on to God. We think if we do enough mental gymnastics or enough fanciful praying, or have enough faith, or strain spiritually enough, we can somehow catch God. But it's not our job to catch God. God catches us. God comes to us. We don't go to God. And God catches us. God touches us. God speaks to us and says, "Don't be afraid. I've got you."

Nouwen later reflects: "I remember it well. It had been a difficult time for me. Real trouble had come, and I was afraid."

"I'm in deep," I cried out to God.

"I'm deeper," God replied.

"How deep?" I asked.

"Let go and see," God whispered.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.