

### **Matthew 17:1-9**

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then 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." While 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!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As 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."

**Fearless** - February 19, 2023  
*Matthew 17:1-9*

"Live Fearless." I'm sure you've all heard that phrase on radio or TV. It is the slogan of Independence Blue Cross/Blue Shield, the health insurance company based in Philadelphia. The grammarian in me always gets a bit peeved when I hear it on the radio or see it on a billboard, because from a grammatical standpoint, the slogan is wrong. It should be "Live Fearless-ly" The word "live" is a verb, a command, which the word fearless modifies. Words that modify verbs are called adverbs and they almost always end with the suffix -ly. Or so I was taught in elementary school. They don't teach much grammar nowadays so I doubt anyone under the age of 30 even knows or cares that the Blue Cross slogan is grammatically incorrect. So why should I, or any of us care?

In 1933, when he was inaugurated as president, Franklin Roosevelt gave a speech stating, "The only thing we have to fear -- is fear itself." When he began his term, the nation was locked into the worst of the Great Depression. Over one third of the country was out of work. Almost no one in this room experienced the Depression first hand, but I'm sure many of us heard stories about the suffering that went along with it. As a child, I was told how my grandfather had to support his parents, his wife and children, and his brother, his brother's wife and his brother's children, on the salary of a park ranger living in West Virginia. The economic situation President Obama inherited when he took office in 2009 was not nearly as bad as what things were like when Roosevelt took over. Nevertheless, we all know about fear. Fear is real and fear touches our lives often when we least expect it. The point of Roosevelt's address was to remind the people that worst thing about fear is that it can cause us to say, think, and do things that we have not really thought about very well. Fear, in short, can make us look very short-sighted and very foolish.

Yet fear was exactly what overcame Peter, James, and John when Jesus took them up a mountain where they witnessed Jesus transformed, or transfigured, into a shining being unlike anything they had ever seen and, if that were not enough, they also witnessed him conversing with Moses and Elijah! Can we imagine ourselves there in place of the disciples? Can we understand why they were overcome with fear?

I hope so. I know I'd be. But even if some of us can't understand the fear gripping the disciples, at least Jesus did. Jesus saw the fear in his friends as he watched them fall to the ground, sweating and trembling, no doubt. It cannot be surprising that the first words Jesus said to his friends was, "Get up and do not be afraid."

Indeed, Jesus telling his disciples not to fear shouldn't be surprising at all. You may have heard the story that the words "fear not" appear in the Bible 365 times, one for every day of the year. That's not actually true. Depending on which version of the Bible you look at, "fear not" or similar words appear fewer than 150 times in both the Old and New Testaments. What is true, however, that there are well over 365 passages of scripture that in some way urge us to trust in God and not be afraid.

But why does Jesus urge his friends to not be afraid? I mean, fear is for many the best way to control other people. The Transfiguration was obviously an experience that makes the light shows at Disney World look rather tame in comparison. Many politicians and tyrants around the world and even in our own country seek to rule by fear and intimidation. It would have been easy for many rulers to take advantage of the lights, sounds, and voices to tell the people, "Look at me in all my glory, isn't this wonderful, isn't this amazing, don't all of you see why I am the best!"

Jesus could have used this moment to scare his followers into supporting him more closely. He could have asked them to tell the others what they had seen, implying that Jesus could summon God's power instantly and force them into submission. He could have promised that even more powerful and intimidating signs and wonders were on the way. Just think about the scene from the Wizard of Oz where Dorothy and her friends first meet the "Great and Powerful Oz." Lots of smoke. Lots of light. Lots of sound. Lots and lots and lots of fear.

Of course, we know that at the end of the story, the "Great and Powerful Oz" is revealed to be a fraud, just like every tyrant who has ruled over the course of history. But while he is in power and has duped his followers into believing he not only has power, but is power personified, he can certainly does make his followers do just about anything.

Isn't it revealing that Jesus acts exactly in the opposite way during the Transfiguration? Instead of using the Transfiguration to increase the devotion of his disciples by means of fear, he by contrast tells them to keep quiet. Instead of staying up on the mountain to bask in the awe and worship of his disciples, Jesus leads them back down the mountain where they are promptly confronted with new problems and new disputes. Once they came back down from the mountain, it was almost like the Transfiguration never happened. Why did Jesus not exploit his power moment?

When we say the Lord's Prayer, we conclude with the words, "For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory Forever." Well, doesn't the Transfiguration moment exemplify everything about God's Kingdom and God's Power and God's Glory? Why yes, yes it does. Not in the human way we think of Kingdoms, Powers, and Glories, but in God's way. Jesus chose not to exploit the

Transfiguration as an opportunity to control his disciples, but rather showed his disciples what the Kingdom, Power, and Glory of God are truly about.

Once again, in the Transfiguration, Jesus takes human ideas about the way the world is supposed to work and turns them upside down. What is Kingdom, Power, and Glory?

We are so mistaken when we confuse Kingdoms as being vast tracts of land ruled by kings and dictators who squeeze what they can out of the regular people and make sure their friends are pardoned or at least have their jail time reduced. No, the Kingdom of God, while indeed vast and is indeed ruled, is the total opposite of a human kingdom or nation. God's Kingdom is a place where the regular people are lifted up and the supposed high and mighty are brought down. God's Kingdom is where every one of us is free to discover the many gifts and talents God gave us when we were born and continues to give us every day of our lives. God does not wish to exploit us. Rather, God seeks to build us up. God does not want the best for Godself, God wants the best for us! What a shame it is that so many people fear exploring their own abilities and potentials. Yes, for some there are some very good psychological reasons for their holding back. But for most of us, we don't become the women and men God intends for us to be mainly because we just don't want to make the effort. How sad.

What is the Glory of God? We've seen plenty of paintings from the middle ages showing God and Jesus and all the saints positively glowing with power. We think that Glory is all about demonstrating the world just how wonderful we are and how awful everyone else is. "Look at me! Look at me! Look at me!" Ain't I great!

But God's glory is not about calling attention to God's greatness. God has no need for that. Rather, as the song we offered just two weeks ago, "Shine, Jesus, Shine" tells us, God's glory is meant to spread throughout the world. God's glory is intended to pierce the darkness of our souls and drive away evil by shining light on the truth. God's glory, in other words, is not for the benefit of God, it is light for our benefit.

Power. We've heard a lot about power. Although this is not an election year, they are already discussing the Presidential election in 2024 and so we are hearing over and over again the news stories about people vying for power to rule in this country. But as anyone who knows anything about Jesus is aware, God's power is nothing like human power. Human power, at its heart, is all about force. Whether you like or dislike this president, he, in accordance with all his predecessors, governs with the power to force us to obey laws and follow regulations we may or may not want. Nobody agrees with everything government does. Nonetheless, we have to follow whether we like

it or not, or face the possibility of going to jail. In other words, force or the threat of force is why we obey.

God's power, however, is the extreme opposite of force. God's power is easily understood. God's power is the power of love. Love is the opposite of force.

In human terms, power is all about making us do what someone else wants us to do, whether we agree with it or not. I have power when you do what I say, especially when you don't like it. Now to be sure, God has power in the typical human ways we understand it. God kicked Adam and Eve out of the Garden. God sent the plagues that forced Pharaoh to let the children of Israel leave Egypt. God's power helped Israel defeat her enemies in war and occasionally helped the enemies to defeat Israel. Yes, God certainly has secular, human power and is not at all shy about using it.

But using human ideas of power is not God's preferred strategy. Now we know that throughout history, hundreds of prophets and preachers have appeared, calling on God to condemn the human race for all the terrible things we have done — especially the things we have done supposedly in the Name of the Lord. God's plan is use the power of love to lead us gently and show us that God embraces us fully.

By telling his disciples not to fear, then leading them back down the mountain into the everyday world, Jesus demonstrated the greatest love possible for the world. Jesus got back into his work of meeting people of all kinds and hearing their stories and helping them with their problems. That is love. The more we see God's love at work in the every day events of our lives, just as Jesus did, the more we can understand that God's true power lies in God's loving us into being God's followers, rather than forcing us to be God's followers. Human power gives us no choice: obey or else. God's loving power draws us into a relationship with God so that we are motivated to act in this world not out of fear, but out of the sheer joy of making a difference in another's life, regardless of who they are. When God's power is at work in our lives, we have no need to fear anything.

So let's circle back to that word, fear — the word with which I began this sermon. The Blue Cross/Blue Shield folks want us to "Live Fearless." But as the Transfiguration episode demonstrates, as every day in our lives demonstrates, we cannot live without fear invading our lives. Try as hard as we can, we cannot make our fears just go away.

But while we can't "Live Fearless" we can live fearlessly. We live fearlessly when we realize that we cannot banish our fears alone but we can call upon the Love of God revealed fully in Jesus Christ to help us calm our fears and face life not alone, but in the security of the power and glory of God.

The disciples came down from the mountain and back to the chaos of their regular lives, but they did so knowing that their friend Jesus was with them, the one who is first in the kingdom of God.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.