

Splendor of Light

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
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Transfiguration – Year A
Matthew 17:1-9



Bathed in the splendor of light, Peter wants to stop time. Jesus, his face shining like the sun, his clothing radiating glorious light, Moses and Elijah walking alongside him, all of it seems the fulfillment of ancient dreams.

“It is good for us to be here.”

When Kim and I go to the mountains for a week, just the two of us, majestic views all around, we will find a thousand ways to say it – “It is good for us to be here.”

Every Easter Day service, every Christmas Eve candlelight, people come out the doors, the “Hallelujah Chorus” still echoing off the walls, dropping their candle in the box, saying, “It is good for us to be here.”

A couple walks into their home carrying the baby for the first time. They sit and watch her while she sleeps. One of them gets up to go and on the way out the door, whispering so as not to wake the baby, says, “It is good for us to be here.”

We have a phrase for these times, times that are filled with light and promise and newness and hope and life – mountaintop experiences.

And *this*, Peter knows, is a mountaintop experience. He thinks of Moses, whose face shone every time he came down from the mountain where he had communed with God. The people begged him to veil his face because they were terrified. But here they see Jesus with Moses, face alight with glory, unveiled.

He thinks of Elijah, that great prophet of God, who was taken away in a whirlwind. Prophecies said that when Elijah returns, the messianic age will arrive. And here was Elijah. So yes, this is the time, this is the moment. It is good to be here.

When Elijah returns, the tradition said, booths would be built. Peter proposes building them here and now – one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus.

Up to this point the only voice in the story belongs to Peter. Now, another voice interrupts. It descends from a bright cloud, and the words will stop Peter's building plans and send him back down the mountain.

Sometime late in the week, as we sit on the deck and watch the sun drop below the mountain in a blaze of red, we'll look at each other and say, "Do we have to leave? Can't we just stay here?"

Inevitably on the way out of Easter service, somebody will wave his hand around at the crowd and say, "Don't you wish it could be Easter every Sunday?"

And the couple watching that little one sleep can hear the ticking of the clock and a part of them wants her to stay like this, just freeze this moment, stop time's relentless march.

So far this story has seemed more like a dream – Jesus will later call it a vision – with surreal qualities – Jesus' shining face and clothing, the sudden appearance of Moses and Elijah, and now this bright cloud, which calls to mind the cloud that descended onto Mt. Sinai when Moses received the law. But when the voice speaks from the cloud, it brings them back to reality, and sends them falling to the ground in abject terror.

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

They will be building no booths today, these fear-stricken three, lying on the ground covering their faces. The same voice heard at Jesus' baptism, proclaiming him the Son of God before he had ever done a single act of ministry, now proclaims him the Son of God again, blessing all he has said and done. God continues to be well pleased. But now three words are added to the baptismal blessing – "Listen to him!"

It is an emphatic demand, a commandment, delivered with an exclamation point. And Peter is no longer saying anything about it being good to be here. He's no longer going on about booths. Jesus, with whom they had walked and talked, is revealed to be the very Son of God, the fulfillment of Moses (the law) and Elijah (the prophets).

Tom Long suggests that the disciple's fear may have been two-fold. They were in fear because of the voice of God and presence of God, to be sure. "But perhaps they were also frightened or overwhelmed by the command to listen to Jesus, by the thought that every word of Jesus was more than a religious idea to be thoughtfully considered and debated. Rather, his words were ethical mandates to be obeyed."

Whereas before they wanted to stop time to preserve the luminous space where Jesus is aglow and walking about with Moses and Elijah. Now, they lay on the ground in fear, perhaps wanting to stop the story, stop the kingdom, they wanted no more part of it.

I remember a time when my daughter was a teenager, I walked into her bedroom one evening to say goodnight, and I saw her calendar on the wall. I noticed it was the calendar from 2011, still opened to December. Since we were fairly deep into 2012 at that moment, I noted that she hadn't put up her new calendar.

"I know," she replied. "I keep thinking I should take it down, but I'm having a hard time. I wish time would slow down."

I told her Kim and I sometimes struggled with the same thing, especially when we saw her and Caleb growing and changing. But, I said, I would never want that to happen, because I knew that they both had something unique to offer the world, that they had compassion and joy and love to give and receive. And besides, at a certain point, she'd have to pay rent.

I remember leaving her room and pausing to look at the photos on the hallway walls, all of them of our kids as babies and small children, and felt as strongly as ever, the desire to just stop everything here – in this warm house, both kids in their beds, content, blessed, surrounded by light. Stop the story here.

After all the light and the cloud and the voice has spoken, with that exclamatory, "Listen to him!" still echoing in the air, there is a moment of stillness. They hear the crunching of the trail as Jesus moves over to them, they feel his familiar touch on their heads, the same touch that had brought healing and wholeness to so many. "Listen to him!" the voice had thundered, and so they did.

"Get up," he said, "and do not be afraid."

Two sets of commands fitting for this day, and all those days when we'd like to stop time, freeze a moment or hide in fear. Get up. Get up. We cannot stay here. Jesus is turning his face toward the cross. Along the way he will teach that the kingdom is coming, along the way he will teach that the way of God is the way of love, along the way he will teach whoever gives a cup of cold water, whoever feeds the hungry or welcomes the stranger or visits the sick is feeding and welcoming and visiting him.

Along the way he will touch the leper and make them clean, he will make broken lives whole, he will be surrounded by sinners and those deemed unworthy and call them beloved, worthy of God's extravagant love. And all of it will get him killed. It will get him nailed to a cross by a world blind to the light in his face, bound to the forms of the past, unwilling to listen.

And so he says words we always need to hear after we are moved out of comfort, out of sentimentality for the past, out of the ways we have always been, and moved toward the radical, painful, vulnerable love for the world expressed on the cross. When we make that move, when we follow, we need to hear, "Do not be afraid."

Fear, when we act on it, is the opposite of faith. Fear of failure, fear of change, fear of death, fear of loss, all turn us away from the radical claims of Christ. Fear freezes us in place. But Christ is on the move.

Wednesday we will gather in this sanctuary, receive the mark of ashes on our foreheads, and hear the words, "Dust you are, and to dust you shall return." It is a way of reminding us that we too are on the move, that we have this brief span of years, and that those of us who claim Christ are called to use those years following him, carrying our cross.

We do not follow alone. We do not bear our cross alone. We bear it together, in community.

And we have the voice of the one we follow. When Kim and I return the keys to the mountain cabin to go back to our lives and all the responsibilities they entail, we hear him, "Do not be afraid."

In the life of a changing landscape for the church in a changing world, when we sometimes long to go back, we hear him, "Do not be afraid."

The couple watching their baby sleep, and then turn over, and then toddle, and then...and then...all along the way they hear him, "Do not be afraid."

Wars and rumors of wars, divisions at home, the cries of the poor, the lonely, the exile, tempting us to put our hands over our ears and fall to the ground, paralyzed by fear, and we hear him, "Do not be afraid."

They go down the mountain, and so shall we. We descend into Lent this week, we turn our eyes to the cross, and what lies beyond. Let me invite you to write them down, put them in your pocket, make them the screensaver on your phone, nail them to the

door...just these words, they are more than enough coming from the one who glowed with the glory of God on this day – “Do not be afraid.” Amen.