



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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February 3, 2008

Last Sunday after Epiphany: Transfiguration

Matthew 17:1-9

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Exodus 24:12, 15-18

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 148

Second Lesson: 2 Peter 1:16-21

Gospel: Matthew 17:1-9

Scared and Prepared

The world around us that the Lord has created for us to live in is pretty amazing. There are many beauties and many splendors left even after the fall into sin. But have you ever stopped and thought about how amazing the body is that the Lord has given us? With the Psalmist we can say "I praise you Lord because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." It's amazing how our body works together to enable us to do various things and how our body endures a lot of hardship at times—how it can adapt to living without sleep when you are raising that newborn, how you can adjust and do things that you just think you can't. But God has created us in some ways that many would say is just how we evolved, but I think it gives evidence of how the Lord has made us because he has purposes for it.

One of the purposes he has in our bodies is adrenaline and how adrenaline prepares us for things. The fight or flight response that happens when you are taken by surprise or when you get scared—your body reacts even before you think, "I better do something and run away" or "I better do something and attack this person." Your body is already reacting. The adrenaline is rushing through you and your body is prepared to do one or the other. It's kind of amazing how the Lord has made us with this built-in self-defense system for us.

Fight or flight, scared and prepared—it's not fight or flight on the mountain of transfiguration, but it certainly was scared and prepared. Sinful human beings scared because they are in the presence of what they had read about and heard about from the time they were little. The majestic glory, the glory of the Lord appearing in a cloud and they are in the cloud. The voice coming and talking to them—these sinful human beings were scared to be in the presence of the holy God. But they were also given a glimpse of how Jesus is divine God on that mountain, so that they would be prepared for what the Lord was going to have them do in the future. That's what we want to think about this morning—how they were scared and prepared. And maybe think about how we also need that glimpse of glory when we are afraid, terrified at times even by our own sin, so that we are prepared to do what the Lord has called us to do.

It's a number of months now right before Jesus would go to Jerusalem for the last time to be betrayed, to be beaten, to be crucified, to be buried and then to rise again. As this last journey of his life on earth, as the God-man begins, he takes Peter, James and John, the inner circle, the inner three together. They go off on a mountain together by themselves and it just simply says he was transfigured before them. After that you read what every one of the gospel writers says, and you can see they are just trying to find

words to describe the indescribable. The word for transfigure is a word that we bring right into English—metamorphoses. Metamorphosis is what the Greek word is literally. It means to change into something else. Think of how a caterpillar changes into a butterfly—completely different, right? A tadpole changing into a frog is completely different. That's the picture of Jesus when his glory is revealed. They are given this glimpse of his divine glory. It isn't just as if someone put a spotlight on his face and he looked a little brighter or his clothes looked a littler whiter. They are just really searching to describe because here his humanity no longer contains fully his divinity. He lets the divinity show through. The glory that he has as true God from all eternity shows through and they are trying to describe it. They really can't.

If that wasn't enough, all of a sudden two of the greatest prophets ever, Moses and Elijah, are there talking with Jesus. We are told in the other gospels they were talking about his upcoming departure—not a plane—his suffering and death. How these guys, Peter, James and John, knew it was Moses and Elijah—I don't think they were wearing name tags that said "Hi, I'm Elijah"—but for whatever reason, God revealed it to them. They knew who it was, and Peter had one of those moments. Maybe you have had one of those moments in life where you just don't want the moment to end. Have you ever had anything like that happen? You are just completely immersed in your surroundings. You are absolutely thrilled to be where you are and if that moment continued on longer and longer and longer, you would be thrilled to death. That's where Peter was as he saw the glory of Jesus, as he saw Moses and Elijah. He says, "It's good for us to be here. Let's build some shelters and we don't ever have to go down. We can just stay here forever and bask in the glory of this moment." I suppose I can understand him saying that. I've had some of those times in my life where you wish the moment wouldn't end. But not a single one of them ended up with me face down in the dirt, scared to death.

Isn't that exactly what happened next to Peter as he was still saying that? Here comes the glory of the Lord in this cloud, the glory of the Lord like he had heard about, like we read in our reading from Exodus. He knew what this cloud was. He knew what this voice was. He knew in whose presence he was and as a sinful human being, Peter, James and John, their legs went limp. They fell face down in the dirt. They were sinful human beings in the presence of the holy God. From elation to abject terror because they were in the presence of God now, because the voice, they didn't know what to make of it. From a moment that will never end, to being scared, that's quite a setting.

Then that voice says "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Words that were important for them to hear and words that Peter used later, as we heard in our Second Lesson, to tell about what he had seen and what he had done and that everything he had told them about Jesus was true because he was an eyewitness. But those words that the Father spoke, "Listen to him! I'm well pleased with him." We understand why the Father is well pleased because Jesus did everything the Father had sent him to do. He lived perfectly in our place because you and I are filthy, rotten sinners who are not perfect. He took every one of our filthy, rotten sins to the cross and paid the price so that they are punished. We know that and we know that is why the Father is well pleased.

But what about that last command that was given to those three apostles and also given to us? “Listen to him!” How good are we at listening to him? When I’m worried, when I’m anxious, I’m really eager to listen to his promises. “I’m with you always to the very end of the age” and “Nothing will separate you from the love that God has for me in Christ Jesus.” I might not always believe them right away, but I’m eager to listen to them when I am worried at those times.

I’m sure you have favorite passages that you love to listen to as you struggle and go through your daily life. Maybe as you struggle with sin you love to hear “though your sins be as scarlet, they will be as white as snow.” Or you love to hear that “he has removed your sin from you as far as the east is from the west. He forgives your sins and remembers them no more.” Those are some things that are pretty neat to listen to, right?

Are you and I as eager to listen to him when Jesus says to us “whoever wants to follow after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me”? Are we really eager to deny ourselves? Pick up a cross? That’s something that we suffer because we are Christians, whether it’s the ridicule of others or whether it’s not fitting in with others, whatever it is, take up that cross and follow him. Are we as eager to listen then? Are we as eager to listen to him when he says “In Christ you are a new creation. The old has gone. The new has come.” Therefore honor God in every aspect of your life—not just the ones that are convenient, not just the ones you like to honor him with, but in every last aspect of your life put yourself down and raise God up. How good are you at listening to him then?

I know I’m not so good. I’ve got a little bit of spiritual earwax built up in my ears with some of these commands God speaks to me so they don’t quite get through to me. Do you struggle with that problem? Do you know where you have failed God for the past hour, for the past week, for the past month? Do you have areas where you look at your life and you say to yourself “How can I keep doing these things? How can I keep rejecting my God and turning to this sin? How can I keep being such a fool? I know better. Why do I keep doing it?”

You have moments as you look at your own life where you want to throw yourself in the dirt because you are scared to death that God might not love you because you are such a filthy rotten sinner. When those times come to us, Jesus comes to us just like he did to the apostles, touches us on the shoulder and says “Get up. Don’t be afraid. I’ve taken away your sins. All those things you have done, I know them. I hate them, but I have taken the punishment they deserve. You are forgiven.”

That message, that simple straight forward message, “You are forgiven,” is what empowers us to want to listen to Jesus. That’s what empowers us to want to live for our God. That’s what empowers us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. The glimpse of glory that you and I see is in the forgiveness that God gives to us, whether its through wine and wafer, whether its through water at a baptismal font, whether its through the absolution—the message of forgiveness that is spoken at the beginning of our service—or whether its through reading through God’s Word in the quiet hours of the morning or the evening and hearing God say to us, “I have forgiven

you,” in all those different places we see God’s glory. We have a glimpse of glory that touches our lives and prepares us for what God has called us to do, just as certainly as Jesus being transfigured before the apostles prepared them for his upcoming suffering and death. That’s what he was preparing them for.

They were going to go and they were going to see things that were going to scare them so much they would try to lock the doors and try to keep out the bad guys. They were going to be so terrified they wouldn’t know which way to turn, what to do, and they would just huddle up around each other and shiver in fear. But at that time, Jesus wanted them to remember that the One who had died was also the One who had revealed his glory to them and that he would be with them.

And then that last message, you wonder if it sunk in with their heads spinning with everything that was going on—Moses, Elijah, Jesus’ glory there for them to see. They are going down the mountain and Jesus says “Don’t tell anyone about this until I have risen from the dead.” You wonder if they came back to that phrase “I have risen from the dead” as they were huddled together in fear. If it didn’t click for them then, it certainly did when the Spirit came upon them at Pentecost because they began to boldly talk about it in ways that were beyond their abilities. God prepared them for the journey that would be the rest of their life, and for one of those three, James, it would end not that long after Jesus. He wouldn’t live out into his old age. Before the Book of Acts is over, James is dead. It prepared him for his journey whether it was long or short.

Listening to Jesus prepares us for our journey, whether it is long or short, whether it is full of lots of hills and valleys or only a seemingly unending valley, listening to Jesus helps us get through it. That’s why God puts us together with our fellow believers in a congregation like this so that we can be Jesus’ voice as we speak to one another, so that we can encourage one another, so that we can sharpen one another as iron sharpens iron, so that we can be prepared so that we can hear Jesus’ voice as each other speaks it.

As I teach various Bible classes, it never ceases to amaze me the observations that our members make that I haven’t thought of, and I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about a lot of these different things that I’m teaching, the Bible or Doctrines, but someone always comes up with another observation that just strikes me. That’s amazing. And that’s a blessing that God gives us that prepares us for our journey. He gives us other people that have heard Jesus’ voice and share what they have learned and then we are prepared.

Jesus has risen from the dead, you and I know it. We are going to go through a time now where we will reflect on exactly what he had to go through before he rose from the dead. We will see what our sins put Jesus through and we will mourn over our sin, but we will always have this message, “Get up, you are forgiven. Tell others about my resurrection.”