

SERMON: Get Up and Do Not Be Afraid

TEXT: Matthew 17:1-9

When I was a child, I shared a bedroom with my two sisters. Emily was just a year and a half older than I, and we had to share a double bed. Our older sister, Carole, had lots of cool teenager stuff around the room, the most memorable of which was a poster of the Beatles on the wall. When Carole wasn't around, Emily and I would stand on the bed facing the Beatles poster, and we would jump up and down screaming, "Oh, the Beatles!" Then we'd fall backward, pretending we had fainted at the sight of the Fab Four.

Thinking back on this, I wonder if we were imitating the screaming fans out of a desire to be like them, or if we were mocking them for their outrageous fanaticism. If memory serves, I think we were laughing at them.

Today I'll admit that I've probably attended more symphony concerts than rock and roll events in my life. I still find the fanaticism for groups and individual artists to be over-the-top. When you're so excited to hear your favorite musician that your screaming drowns out the music, well then you're too excited.

You might describe such events as *mountaintop* experiences. What other occasions can you think of that have really almost knocked you off your feet? Maybe the Kansas City Chiefs winning the Super Bowl for the first time in 50 years? Or the St. Louis Blues winning the Stanley Cup? Maybe it was your first kiss, the day you fell in love, or the moment your child was born.

There are certainly plenty of what I'll call *deep valley*, negative experiences that pull the rug out from under us, as well. Like a sudden and unexpected death, a devastating health diagnosis, or the loss of a job or a relationship. Unfortunately, those memories often stay with us longer than the mountaintop moments.

Today, we read once again the story of the Transfiguration. Peter, James, and John had been invited to go up the mountain with Jesus. They experienced sights and sounds and events that no one had ever witnessed before: Jesus, shining like the sun in his dazzling white clothes; the ghosts of Moses and Elijah suddenly appearing with Jesus; God's voice speaking out of a bright cloud overhead. Any of these alone would be enough to make a person fall to the ground in shock and fear.

I have a lot of questions about this story, each of which I could probably write a sermon around. Why just these three disciples? Where were the others? Was Jesus playing favorites, taking his most trusted leaders with him? Or was it simply a matter of crowd control? He knew the scene would be chaotic enough with just three of them.

In the past I wondered why it was Moses and Elijah who appeared on the mountain. Then I learned that Moses represents the Law - the Ten Commandments - and Elijah represents the prophets. The transfiguration event connects Jesus with them to show that he is the one who came to fulfill the commandments of the Law and the teachings of the Prophets. Jesus is the Messiah. The one for whom the Israelites have been waiting.

It's always a bit of comic relief to watch Peter and imagine what he was up to with his offer to make dwellings for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Peter is always the impulsive and impatient one. The one who tends to act before he thinks. The one who wants to take charge and get some control over the chaos.

The part of the story I don't remember reading before, though, is that *Jesus came and touched them*. GET UP AND DO NOT BE AFRAID, he said.

He touched them - probably because he knew what they were thinking: *Pinch me, so I know I'm not dreaming!* He touched them in a gesture of comfort and reassurance. He touched them in order to help them refocus their eyes and their minds. Like you would do with someone who is panicking or losing control. Maybe Jesus took them by the shoulders, looked them in the eyes, and said, "Look at me. I'm right here. Everything is okay."

With his next move, Jesus doesn't let them dwell in their fear. GET UP AND DO NOT BE AFRAID. "And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone."

At that point, I imagine myself either trying to find the words to talk about what I just experienced, or pummeling Jesus with rapid-fire questions. What just happened? Were those ghosts we saw? Whose voice was that? Why are you glowing? What does all this mean? And why can't we tell anyone?

Last week at the Presbytery meeting, we heard from representatives of several congregations who traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, to visit the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Also known as the National Lynching Museum, the memorial opened to the public almost two years ago. It is our nation's first memorial dedicated to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence.

As you might imagine, the experience was powerful and painful for the white members of the group as well as the blacks. One of the black participants told about how many of the whites in the group fell silent at the memorial, and stayed silent for a very long time afterward. Many of us can likely relate to the feeling. What words would possibly be adequate to address the ancestors of such brutal and inhumane treatment?

Finally, though, a young black woman expressed her frustration with another African American. "It's not fair," she said. "It's not fair for the whites to walk away and not talk about this with us. It's too easy."

Her frustration was shared with the rest of the group, and they all agreed. Just because whites of our generation can plead innocent to the crime of slaveholding or lynching, that does not relieve us of the responsibility to talk about it, to face up to the truth of our ancestors's brutality, to listen to the trauma and the pain that our black sisters and brothers still contend with.

It was no mountaintop experience that this group shared. It was a deep valley experience. Nevertheless, it knocked them off their feet. It made them want to hide their faces. But Jesus touched them. **GET UP AND DO NOT BE AFRAID.**

They realized that their experience could not be left there in Alabama, but would have to be brought back home. They knew that they would have to continue the work of facing the truth and telling the truth. The work of hearing the pain of blacks and waking up to the privilege of being white. The work of antiracism and dismantling the racist and oppressive systems in which we participate.

Jesus revealed himself - his majesty and his divinity - up on that mountain, not just so his friends would have a good story to tell. But so they would understand who he was. So that they would pay attention to that voice from the

cloud saying, "Listen to him." Jesus was momentarily changed on that mountain so that we would be forever changed from that moment on. So that we would go back down the mountain challenged, inspired, and empowered to do his work, to stand up to injustice, to speak up for those without a voice, to love the unlovable, and never go back to normal.

GET UP AND DO NOT BE AFRAID. Listen to him! To the glory of God.

AMEN.