

## **“Touched by Grace”**

Exodus 24:12-18 and Matthew 17:1-9

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Transfiguration of the Lord, February 26, 2017

Pastor Jeff Fox-Kline

Just a heads up, this week’s gospel reading is pretty wild. It’s one of the places in the Gospels where we are exposed to God’s raw power and grandeur. I want to call attention to the overlaps that we will hear between the Matthew passage and the Exodus passage, the mountaintop, the shining light, the cloud. It is just one of the ways in which we are shown Jesus place in Jewish history. I also want make mention of the significance of the two people who appear alongside Jesus. Elijah and Moses, two monumental figures from the Old Testament who appear alongside Jesus. These two figures possibly represent the law and the prophets, essentially representing the entirety of the Old Testament. The story of the transfiguration is a big and confusing story, so try to listen like you’re hearing it as a first century Jew, hearing about the miraculous occurrence high up on that mountain.

1. Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.
2. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.
3. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.
4. 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."

5. 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!"
6. When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.
7. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."
8. And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.
9. 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."

Wow. What a story. I'm always blown away by how massive it is. It's not a very long passage, but it packs a huge punch. The sheer spectacle of it is mind blowing. In the previous chapter, these three disciples learned that Jesus was going to die. Also in Matthew 16 Jesus asked Peter who Jesus is. Peter responded to Jesus "you are the messiah, the son of the living God". And with those two pieces of information at the front of their mind, Jesus invites them to join him on a mountain, how could they say no? So they ascend the mountain with Jesus, knowing that they were going up to the top of the mountain with the Son of God. However, no matter how much they knew; no matter how well prepared they were; they would never be prepared for what was about to come. What happened next was a display of sheer dazzling power. This is God's might on full display. We hear of this mighty God in the story of the Exodus. "Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel." This is the God that we claim as mighty and sovereign. Jesus, as God, is the carrier of such tremendous power. In the face of such incomprehensible majesty, the disciples reacted. First, they tried to commemorate the occasion. Peter, often well intentioned, not as often right,

suggested they memorialize the mountain by building “dwellings”. Peter, who knew at this point that Jesus will be given up to die, tried to keep the glory of God stuck on top of the mountain. Let me build you three dwellings, he said, almost imploring God to give up the path of sacrifice, and instead stay in communion with the Moses and Elijah. But God did not let that slide. God’s glory and grandeur could not be contained in one place, and so a cloud overtook them “This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased; Listen to him!” And the disciples fell on their faces. They were enveloped in the presence of God! They were witness first hand to a kind of exceptional magnificence to which the only logical response is abject terror. This is the God that we worship. When we join together on Sundays we sing to this “mighty fortress”, to this “Immortal, Invisible” God. When we talk about our God, we talk about a God whose reach extends beyond the highest heavens, who is capable of creating our planet.

This is the foreground of our scripture today. It’s so easy to see this passage and get lost in the majesty, the import, the huge explosive displays of power. The transfiguration occurs in three of the four gospels, only omitted from John. Each of Gospel tells the story in its own unique way. Luke tells of the wakefulness of the disciples, foreshadowing the disciples sleeping in Gethsemane. Mark tells the story with its typical austerity, not a word wasted. Matthew, however, adds a detail that stands out in its beauty and elegance. Matthew tells us “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.” Did you hear it? There’s one part that strikes me as particularly affecting, given the splendor that immediately preceded it. “But Jesus came and touched them”. Through the cloud, descending from the majesty and

splendor of the transfiguration, Jesus saw his friends, his loved ones, his disciples wracked with fear, and he responded in a way that is simultaneously incredible and intimate. He came down and touched his disciples. John Calvin, on reflecting on the power of that small moment said “all thinking of God, apart from Christ, is a bottomless abyss which utterly swallows up all our senses... In Christ God so to speak makes himself little, in order to lower himself to our capacity; and Christ alone calms our consciences that they may dare intimately approach God”. Clearly there is a miracle in Jesus ascendency on that mountain. Clearly there is splendor in God’s appearance with the law and the prophets. There is no disputing that that is the headline of the transfiguration story. But it is not the whole of the story. It is not the sole miracle that we see. What we see in Jesus response to the disciples’ fear is nothing less than the appearance of God, in person, comforting those who quake in fear. John Calvin is right to say that thinking about God swallows up our senses. God is just too big to imagine. But God remedies that by showing us Jesus calmly walking through the fear, gently putting his hands on his disciples and letting them know that there is nothing to fear. And it worked. The disciples listened, they descended the mountain with Jesus, whose glory they witnessed, but whose compassion they tangibly felt. To be a Christian is to not only hold those two aspects of God in tension, but to actively celebrate them. The Christian life is one that knows our God holds the whole world and created us in God’s image, but also walked the countryside, slept on dirt, and loved his friends, family, and even enemies deeply.

With God enfleshed, we are then shown how we are to be. We often talk about Jesus in these terms. Jesus is to be emulated, to be celebrated, to be worshipped. When I think of Jesus as “God with us” there are certain aspects that I like to emphasize. When I think about emulating Jesus my mind immediately goes to Jesus as radical. I

love to think about Jesus flipping over the tables in the temple and driving out the moneychangers. I love to think about Jesus healing on the Sabbath, showing the Pharisees as hypocrites who care more about the appearance of holiness than actually practicing righteousness. I love to think of myself as the kind of person who actively works for the upside down, countercultural kingdom in which the last are first and the first are last. We emulate Jesus when we lift up the foreigner, the oppressed, the impoverished. I love to focus on those aspects of Jesus. But that isn't the totality of Jesus life. Jesus was also there to reach out and heal the lame and the blind. Jesus's ministry was also to calm the storm and quell the fears of the disciples. When I talk about God, I tend to focus on God as liberator, on Jesus as radical. There's a saying that I love to employ, that the role of the Christian is to "comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable". Often times, when I say that, I focus on afflicting the comfortable. I think this has the unfortunate side effect of leaving out the importance of comforting. The truth of the matter is that the call to comfort others is just as important as it is to challenge the status quo. Jesus reached out his hands to the disciples, told them that they had no need to be afraid. And when you look at Jesus life, you see that the people he comforted and those he touched were people most detested by society. Jesus's hands, reaching out in love, extended towards the dispossessed, the oppressed. Jesus's ministry of care showed us what it looks like to care, while also being a radical proponent of a world that reaches out in love to all corners. What a gift it is that we have a God that is willing to become vulnerable out of love and concern for God's people. This love, this comfort sends us out to love and comfort others

Jenny was in middle school when her father was diagnosed with brain cancer. The whole family was extraordinarily involved at the church; members of session and

deacons. The diagnosis was a brutal and heartbreaking event in the life of the family and the life of the church. The whole church rallied around the family, providing meals for those nights that cooking was too much; providing childcare when the mother had to be with her husband; providing love when the whole situation seemed so hopeless. Then, through some miracle, he fought through the cancer and emerged on the other side. I was not around when he was diagnosed, but I joined the church as youth director shortly after his recovery. Jenny was a quiet girl, wise beyond her years. She was a reliable member of the group, who always seemed to enjoy herself. When it came time to plan the year's activities I asked the youth about some things that they wanted to do. The typical answers came: bowling, laser tag, overnights. But then Jenny said she had an idea that she wanted to share. She had heard about an organization named Project Linus that provides blankets for children in the hospital. It was the one thing that she really wanted to do. I was struck by this, and asked her more about it and she told me that when she had to spend time in the hospital with her dad it was lonely and sad, but that the love that she received while there made her feel better in a terrible moment, and that she wanted to do something like that for kids in the hospital.

This is the kind of life that Jesus would have us lead. Inspired by the compassion that Jesus showed, the church showed compassion to Jenny and her family. Then Jenny turned around and showed that compassion to other children. Jesus, the compassionate and loving God, showed us that the small intimate moments of love are transcendent. How many of us have received love and care from someone in this congregation? How many of us have then turned around and displayed that love outwards. And this love only multiplies. This is the kind of radical love that turns enemy into friend, stranger into family and wounded into healthy. When his disciples

were quaking in fear, Jesus reached out and touched them, saying “don’t be afraid”. There’s a lot of fear out in the world, a lot of sadness, a lot of pain. But we know Jesus reached out, and we know that we are able to reach out. Let us go out today, into the world. Let us go and touch someone, tell them not to be afraid, tell them that we will walk with them through their struggle, that we will help them overcome, that we will be there for them, because our God did the same for us, how could we not?