

Church of the Pilgrimage
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Matthew 17:1-9

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The Courageous Heart

In the Christian Church today is Transfiguration Sunday. We are also at the end of February, a month we celebrate Valentine's Day, Presidents day and black history. In this upcoming week as we begin a new month we also start the beginning of Lent. We are in the midst of winter and along with several snow storms we seem to have some spring like days as well. Some may see this as jarring, or some may think it's kind of exciting. That is what the Transfiguration is - something that is a bit jarring and exciting!

The Transfiguration refers to the event we heard in Matthew's gospel, when Jesus was visibly glorified by God in the presence of three disciples - Peter, James and John. This story is also recorded in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. All the accounts portray the transformation as outwardly visible and consisting in an actual physical change in the body of Jesus. The radiant splendor experienced was not by a light or brightness outside but from within. The Greek word translated as "transfiguration" is the word "metamorphothe," from which we get "metamorphosis". From the science of biology we know, a "metamorphosis" is a transformation, a complete change of appearance and form. Some familiar examples are a caterpillar into a butterfly, or a tadpole into a frog. This change in form or appearance usually means a development into something better or greater than it was before, perhaps a spiritual change. In addition to Jesus changing in front of them, suddenly there appeared before the disciples, Moses and Elijah. As one commentator writes, Moses and Elijah may represent the Law and the prophets, showing the relationship between the old and the new covenants.

The disciples, when they witnessed this event, were terrified and filled with awe. Just take a moment and imagine what that might have been like. Here you are following this teacher, you are amazed at what he is saying and speaking to you in a way that makes more sense than anything you have heard before. He takes you away, you follow this teacher and go up a high mountain, which represents not only getting away from the crowds but getting closer to God. You go off to a quiet place for reflection and prayer, then right before your eyes you witness this

event - this transfiguration. How might you respond? I think we would be not unlike the disciples - terrified and filled with awe.

One writer, James Kirk, a Presbyterian minister, describes the transfiguration "like the Epiphany or Pentecost where heaven and earth seem to come together for a time and set spectacular events in motion. In a sense of foretaste of what it will be like in the presence of God: the dazzling splendor, seeing the giants in the faith talking among themselves, the voice of God sending forth utterances." And we would probably respond like Peter, not knowing what to do. We might make some feeble suggestion that in hindsight would seem like the dumbest thing that could have been said. There Peter was in the midst of greatness, and all he could think of was building shelters, rather than just experiencing the glory. I know, some of you are saying, he was just being practical and thinking ahead. How often do we miss experiencing the glory because we are just being practical and doing the work we always just do?

Have you ever had the experience where heaven and earth seem to come together for a moment? Maybe it was a conversation with someone or maybe an event, some accomplishment that you achieved or the birth of a child. Maybe it was listening to beautiful music or watching a glorious sunrise. Maybe for you it is a special place. We have had the opportunity to visit the Grand Canyon in Arizona. It is truly a holy place. Even with hundreds of people, when we were there, as people approached the canyon, they began to whisper. There is a sense of the sacred there. You may not have to travel to Arizona to find your sacred spot. For some, the ocean provides that sense of the sacred and it's just one block down the street from here. Believe it or not, watching the snowfall when you are safe at home all warm and cozy, may give you that sense of heaven and earth coming together, when we see that we are just one small part of a larger greatness. Time and again God has a way of breaking through the course of events we pursue transforming the mundane into the sacred. Just this week, new planets were discovered, isn't that amazing. For a moment our world stands still, transfixed in the presence of an awesome wonder. No one can predict when or how such times occur. But like Peter, James and John we come away convinced that we have truly been among noble company. Such are the traits of transfiguration.

February is the month of "the feast of hearts", Valentine's Day. Even though it was a couple of weeks ago, I love Valentine's day because it is a time when we are intentional about telling people we love them. We can tell people what they mean to us; how special they are; we thank them for the kindnesses they have shown us. Love is a precious thing and we are able to love others because God loved us first. God's love for us is unconditional, complete and never ending. Love is the most powerful force on the earth, it is a force that transforms. Sometimes it takes a courageous heart to believe that this power is true. This power of love, this power that comes from God is meant for us and indeed does transform us.

When we think about winter with its harsh cold winds and layers of frozen earth, and snowstorms, we might be prompted to think about courage. Joyce Rupp writes: "courage is a wonderful gift of the human spirit. Think of the trees and all living things that must stand so well through wintertime. And people have the same kind of stamina, people with courageous hearts, people who have the confidence to face the winter of their lives. Sometimes it is not until we have faced some winters in our lives, some challenges and struggle, that we are able to know

our own courage and are able to understand just how brave we can be. We can all think of people and circumstances in their lives that we say to ourselves, "I can't imagine what it would be like to live with..." those circumstances."

Over the years I have run support groups, I often hear people say, I thought I had it bad until I heard the other person's story. Some examples of people I know, a volunteer at a hospital who has been widowed three times, yet still wanted to give back. A former coworker whose daughter has two children with autism. A close friend who was diagnosed with cancer, her husband was being treated for cancer and died, yet she did not give up. Young people today pressured with drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, and sexting. I'm sure you can think of many other examples too.

Members of a 4th grade class were asked the question: "What Is Courage". Their answer was: "Having faith. Being brave. Doing something when you're scared of it. Doing something when you think you can't. Trying something that you've never done before. Being nice to people with disabilities. That's courage!" C.S. Lewis said, "Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point." As children, many of us were taught courage in the form of the warrior or the explorer, bravely facing danger. In the Buddhist understanding, great courage is not demonstrated by aggression or ambition. Aggression and ambition are more often expressions of fear and delusion. The courageous heart is the one that is unafraid to open to the world, to care no matter what. With compassion and love we come to trust our capacity to open to life without armoring. As the poet Rilke reminds us, "Ultimately it is on our vulnerability that we depend." This is not a poetic ideal but a living reality, demonstrated by sages like Mahatma Gandhi who had the courage to be jailed and beaten, to persevere through difficulties without giving in to bitterness and despair. His vulnerability became his strength. Or as Martin Luther King Jr. exhorted us, "Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the instruments of love." At the worst times, such an attitude may seem impossible. Yet even though some of King's followers later rejected his precepts of non-violence, something in us knows that closing down is not the way. Yes, the world is full of pain, uncertainty, and injustice. But in this vulnerable human life, every loss is an opportunity either to shut out the world or to stand up with dignity and let the heart respond.

Courage does not mean just gritting our teeth as for an endurance test. Courage does mean drawing from an inner resource, relying on God's power to give us the strength and confidence we need. Courage means never giving up. It means believing that we can make it, not just on our own power, but in the divine power that is always available if we ask for it. Courage is not learned overnight. It results from long years of practice and patience, being brave enough to face what life sends us. Courage is growing through the hardships of life without bitterness, discontent or disillusionment. With courage, the struggle can develop into a mellowness and a deeper sensitivity to just how tender and special the human spirit really is.

The winter of our lives gives us the opportunity to grow in courage. Courage helps us to accept what cannot be changed and to struggle through what needs to be changed. Courage helps us to gently say what we believe, to hold on to what we know is of value despite the risk of rejection, doubt or failure. Courage enables us to offer forgiveness knowing there may be no

response, to give generously of our time and still have time for ourselves. Courage empowers us to try again when there seems to be only repeated failure, to love wholeheartedly even though all the odds seem against that love being received or returned.

This kind of courage is especially found in faithful people, those who have confidence in their inner resources and the power of God working through them. People who have the gift of courage are those who can feel angry, hurt or depressed, yet bounce back into life and add a bit of laughter and enthusiasm to other lives as well as their own. Some common features of people with a courageous heart are:

- People who are willing to recognize and live with their own unfinishedness, knowing that they are subject to weakness and sometimes failures but that the best of them is good, so very good. They know they have limitations but they do not need to be perfect.
- People who despite their fears, constantly stretch their inner selves to take risks, to meet challenges. They believe in their giftedness and know that the best way to thank God for it is to continually reach into risk, discovering and developing their hidden potential.
- People who know how to laugh and to enjoy life even in the most difficult times; they do not take themselves too seriously as to grimace and fret through each day.
- People who take time for solitude - who utilize their sacred places to think, and to pray in order to distance themselves and get a good perspective on their present situation.
- People who have their values in order, recognizing that people are always more important than material things, knowing that it is only the immaterial values such as love that they will carry them into eternal life.
- People who nurture their relationship with God for they have learned that the more they know this wonderful God, the more they will understand how deeply God cherishes them no matter what happens in their lives.
- People who have a vision within themselves that reminds them that their strength and power, their hope and trust, can never be mustered up all by themselves; rather, it is God in whom they find their strength and often this God gives the needed strength through the encouragement and kindness of others.

So look into your life see where you may need some courage and know that you can recover it even when you doubt it is there. Find it through some solitude; find it by reading Scripture. Find it by looking into the lives of courageous folks around you. Encourage others during their winter time with a note or a call. Ask God to tell you about the courage and resilience you have deep within. So as we go forth this week, whether we have an experience of God like Peter, James and John did or not, may we experience the power of God that is there for us; whether we celebrate Valentine's day or not, may we know the love of God available to us; whether we feel particularly courageous or not, may we know that this power and love can transform the winter of our lives. O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change. Courage to change the things we can and the wisdom to know the difference. Grant us patience with the changes that take time, an appreciation for all that we have; tolerance of those with different struggles and the strength to get up and try again, one day at a time. Amen.