

“Faith Despite Fear”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Transfiguration Sunday – February 11, 2018

Mark 9: 2-9

Fog can be a very scary thing. If you’ve ever driven through thick, dense fog, it can be incredibly disorienting and frightening. Primarily because you simply cannot see as you once could. It envelopes you, it surrounds you, and there’s nothing you can physically do to make it go away. On one of my trips to West Virginia this fall, I remember driving through some pretty dense fog along I-74 to Cincinnati. And I recall being very conflicted: on the one hand, I wanted to keep moving, so as not to be delayed any more than I had to; and on the other hand, I felt utterly helpless in not seeing what was ahead of me.

The other thing about fog is that it can happen in all sorts of places. It can happen way up on mountaintops. It can occur in deep valleys. It can form in the flat plains. It’s a pretty universal weather phenomenon, as it has more to do with air temperature, surface moisture, and a lack of wind or breeze. I guess what I’m saying is that, unless you live in the desert, you’ve likely experienced fog at some point in your life. And who knows, it may even form in the desert, as well!

Fog is a form of a cloud, and most of us would agree that clouds are great to look at – when they are far up in the sky. It’s when they threaten us – with rain and hail and lightning and sleet and snow – that we are not their biggest fans. It’s when clouds and fog envelope us, surround us, and impinge on us that we become irritated and frustrated. Clouds and fog can very much cause us to be afraid. Why? Because they disorient us and remove from us our sense of sight and perspective on the world. We lose our ability to stay connected to the world around us, and we can feel very alone and isolated as we wait for the clouds to dissipate.

Needless to say, there are any number of times in life when we feel like we are in a fog – even when the weather is perfectly clear and sunny. We are called in to our supervisor’s office and learn that our job will be ending at the close of the week, and we walk out into a haze of confusion. We pick up the phone and hear that our loved one or friend has received an unexpected diagnosis of cancer, and we cannot see clearly what is right in front of us. We find evidence of infidelity by our partner, and we are consumed by a cloud of pain and anger. We say goodbye to a friend after a great visit, and an hour later learn she’s been killed in a car accident, and we are enveloped in a fog of shock and grief.

In the natural world, we have to wait for the fog to dissipate before we can move forward. In our lives, a lot of times we also have to wait for

that fog to lift before we see things clearly once again. But in either case, we still have to eventually move forward out of the clouds, towards what is next in our lives.

Today we celebrate Jesus' transfiguration, a moment in Jesus' life which speaks not only to his identity and mission, but also to how we are called to follow God's only Son. And while the disciples who were with Jesus were understandably uncertain and afraid, they nevertheless were faithful witnesses to this extraordinary moment, even if they didn't fully understand it. There are three events which make this mountain-top experience like no other.

First, Jesus himself "was transfigured before them," his physical features change right before Peter and James and John. "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." We know a little what it's like for someone's appearance to change: we notice a woman who is pregnant has a certain "glow" about her; or we can tell in very bright sunlight how someone's clothes seem to shine in an unusual fashion. But what it was like for Jesus to be transfigured is truly unknown to us, for it was like nothing else seen before or ever again.

Second, two people appear out of nowhere standing beside Jesus: Moses and Elijah. We don't know what they said. At first, we're really not sure why these two men out of the Old Testament are selected to be with Jesus. But their presence is very symbolic in this instance. Moses represents the only other human who has seen God face-to-face. And Elijah was very important to the Jews, for he was believed to be the one who would usher in the Messiah, the King of the Jews. Besides these meanings, Moses and Elijah standing beside Jesus on the mountain-top represent the connection of the old with the new, the promise of a covenant people and the promise of the kingdom which is to come. One more time in their lives, Moses and Elijah were God's messengers to God's children.

Third, a cloud descends over the mountain, and a voice from heaven speaks to all who could hear. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." That should sound familiar. It is the same phrase said by God when Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John. On that occasion, the heavens opened and the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. This time, a cloud has covered him, bright and dense, so that he shone even brighter than before. And God declares again how this one, the babe who laid in a manger and now stands on the mountain-top, is beloved by God.

In these three events, Jesus is transformed in some way. In what way, we are not sure, we will never be sure. But in both a physical and symbolic way, something "godly" happens on that mountain-top to Jesus that sets him apart. It is a godly act, it is a God-initiated act, which shows the might and power and glory of God to humans such as Peter and James and John, and for that matter, all of us.

Of course, Peter and James and John don't really understand what is happening as they stand on that mountaintop with Jesus. A cloud envelopes them, they see Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus, a voice from the heavens speaks to them – how would you react? I'd probably be freaked out, to tell you the truth!

We read this morning that “they were terrified” by what was happening. But a more accurate translation might be “they were in great awe” of what they were witnessing. When you witness something that makes you feel you are in the presence of something so much greater than yourself, then you respond with awe and wonder. As Peter and James and John witnessed Jesus' transfiguration, they must have been awe-struck, realizing that God was truly with this man who they were privileged to follow and learn from.

Of course, just because they were in awe doesn't mean that they knew the best things to say. Peter blurts out, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” And as the text says, “He did not know what to say, for they were terrified” (9:5-6). The first thing Peter thought to do was to bottle-up this experience and make these three men comfortable up on this mountaintop. But just as quickly as he had blurted out his suggestion, they were gone.

Peter's response is the natural human response when we are uncertain and fearful. When we are faced with a crisis, or death, or shock, we too “don't know what to say.” And unfortunately, we will become like Peter and blurt out something – even if it's not the most helpful thing to say. Kate Bowler is an author who has written about her experience being diagnosed with stage four cancer. In her words, “The truth is that no one knows what to say. It's awkward. Pain is awkward. Tragedy is awkward. People's weird, suffering bodies are awkward. But take the advice of one man, who wrote to me with his policy: Show up and shut up” (<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/02/08/583774624/what-not-to-say-to-the-terminally-ill-everything-happens-for-a-reason>).

The Transfiguration is a very intimate moment in Jesus' life. It includes just three of the twelve disciples. It is only one of two times that we hear God's voice speaking during the life of Jesus. It includes Moses and Elijah, two esteemed figures from Israel's past. It is a unique and transformative experience in Jesus' life and in the lives of Peter and James and John.

I wonder if that's why Jesus doesn't want them to say anything about it until after he had risen from the dead. I've always found that curious – why not tell the whole world who this man is after you've seen this incredible light show?! But that's not what Jesus seeks or wants. This revelation of God on a mountaintop has been to just a few, and thus it has been deeply intimate to them in their spiritual lives.

There are many moments in our lives of faith that are personal and intimate, where God's nature is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Watching

the sunrise over the ocean and recognizing God's omnipotent presence, we are connected intimately with our Creator. Holding the hand of our loved one as he takes his last breath, we are connected intimately with the one who promises us life eternal. Witnessing the birth of a child, we are connected intimately with the deep love God has for us in forming life. Sharing conversation with a mentor who provides reassurance, wisdom, and guidance, we are connected intimately with the Spirit's movement in our world.

But despite this intimate, powerful moment in their collective lives, Jesus and the disciples came down the mountain. They did not ultimately build tents, as Peter had suggested, and remain up on the mountain, waiting for everyone to come to them. No, they put one step in front of the other, even though they did not fully comprehend what had just happened, even though they did not totally grasp what Jesus had said or why he didn't want them to tell anyone about it (9:9). In each of their footsteps, they walked by faith, trusting that God would be there, through all that life would throw at them.

Eventually, Peter and James and John did tell others about this intimate, powerful, fog-covered, faith-forming experience. Otherwise, we would not know of it today. Perhaps that can be our model in faith. We may have powerful, intimate, unexplainable experiences in life that we sense God's presence. We may not always be prepared at first to share them with others, for we might be terrified or in awe.

But what if eventually we created space in the community of faith to share those intimate moments? What if we developed trust in one another and in God to guide our conversations, recognizing that we are not alone in these mountaintop moments? What would those stories of witness do to our faith and to the faith of others, if we recognized anew the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, his Beloved Son, our Lord? What if we could profess our faith despite our fear?

On this Sunday before we begin our Lenten journey, may we hear anew this story of transformation and faith, so we might grow closer together as disciples of the one who has sent us out to draw the world closer to our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Thanks be to God for His Beloved Son. Amen.