

Texts: Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17: 1-9

This morning is the last Sunday of the Epiphany season, the season of light. Even though winter seems to be dragging on forever, the days are getting longer. In the church year, this final Sunday before Lent begins is the Sunday of the Transfiguration. Today we recall that mountaintop moment where Jesus appears fully human and fully divine. The light that began as a star shining over the manger in Bethlehem now shines in Jesus' face, as bright as the sun.

Matthew's gospel makes a conscious connection between Jesus and Moses. Today's readings from Exodus and Matthew make that connection very clear. In Exodus, Moses takes along Joshua, his protégé, to climb Mount Sinai. In Matthew, Jesus takes along his three closest disciples: Peter, James and John, to climb another high mountain. In Exodus, the glory of the Lord appears to Moses in a cloud covering the mountain. In Matthew, God speaks to Jesus and the disciples from a bright cloud that overshadowed them.

Jesus was transfigured before them, writes Matthew. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white. Again there is a connection with Moses. Later on in Exodus, when Moses comes down from Mount Sinai the second time, his face shines so brightly that he has to cover it with a veil. And even more, Matthew tells us that Moses himself and Elijah appeared to the disciples, talking with Jesus. Moses, the bringer of the Law and Elijah, the greatest of all the prophets.

And then there is this small detail – in Exodus, Moses waits for six days before God calls to him out of the cloud. In Matthew, we are told that this scene on the mountaintop takes place six days after Jesus tells his disciples that he must die and be raised to new life.

Six days. A small but important detail. It reminds us of the six days of creation. It reminds of God's commandment to take a day of Sabbath rest after six days of working. It reminds us that there are times when we wait for God, when we must stop everything we are doing and just be. Even though we know that God is present in all our comings and goings, in all our lying down and rising up, there are moments when we need to simply wait for God.

But Peter doesn't want to wait. Peter wants to get something done. Peter, Jesus' disciple and friend and the rock on whom the church was built – Peter is not able to simply experience the vision of Jesus. He can't quite take it all in. Peter wants to build dwellings, tents, tabernacles. How many of us are like that? How many of us distract ourselves with busy work because we don't really want a deep encounter with God? We want to meet God on our own terms. We don't like to wait. It feels like wasting time. And in the world we live in, there is no support for wasting time. What does waiting get us? Frustration, maybe. Resentment that something or someone is slowing us down. And guilt, perhaps, that someone else may be waiting for us and we don't have enough time for them. Maybe your day is so full that one single delay cascades into being late for everything that comes later.

And then God interrupts all of Peter's planning, interrupts him right as he is speaking, with the same exact words we heard God proclaim at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Beloved Son, with him I am well pleased." But this time, God says something more: "Listen to him." It's a command. And once again there is a connection with Exodus. Just as God gave the words of the commandments to Moses on the top of a mountain, God gives Jesus, God's Word-made-flesh, to the disciples on top of the mountain.

Peter is so busy looking for something to do that he can't simply be, he can't simply wait. And then when he hears God's voice, calling him to obedience, calling him to be still and listen, it is too much. Peter and the others fall to the ground in fear.

I imagine that Peter was finally beginning to figure out just who this Jesus was. Jesus, the rabbi and teacher and master. Six days before this scene, when Jesus asked his disciples "Who do you say that I am," Peter answered the question. He told Jesus that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. And now, Peter is given the privilege of seeing Jesus in his divine glory. But his fear gets the better of him. We watch him fall to the ground. Before Matthew's gospel ends, Peter will fail and fall again. He will fall asleep as Jesus prays in the garden. At a crucial moment he will fail again by denying that he even knows who Jesus is.

When does fear get the better of you? What throws you to the ground, or maybe causes you to run away? Fear of the unknown future? Fear of the unknown person? Fear of the unknown situation? Fear of flying, fear of driving, fear of getting lost, fear that someone is going to harm you, fear of a diagnosis, fear of being abandoned, fear of dying.

But then Jesus reaches out to touch Peter. He reaches out to touch James and John. Does anything banish fear more perfectly than a single human touch? God, whose greatness is so vast, whose glory is so magnificent – this God is willing to become human, to come among us and reach out, touch us and calm our fears.

"Get up, and do not be afraid," says Jesus.

Get up. Except for it's not just "get up." The Greek verb is the same one that the angels will say to the women at the empty tomb – he has "been raised." What Jesus is really saying is "be raised." It's more than simply getting up off the ground; it's about

joining with Jesus in his resurrection. We are resurrection people. And we read this passage right before we begin our 40-day journey of Lent. The transfiguration is the turning point in Matthew's gospel – after this, Jesus and his disciples begin making their way to Jerusalem. Where he will be betrayed and arrested, mocked and beaten, crucified and killed. And then raised. We resurrection people know that death does not have the final word. When Jesus tells Peter and all of us to “be raised,” it is both command and promise.

Do not be afraid. Remember back at the very beginning of the gospel of Matthew, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, and told him not to be afraid, that the baby boy who was yet to be born would be called Emanuel, which means “God-with-us.” Jesus' hand on the shoulder of those three cowering disciples is nothing less than God's own touch. Fear does not have the final word either. Fear is not what defines us. We are people of the resurrection and we live, not in fear, but in courage. We live, not in fear, but in hope.

God comes into the world, not only in a brilliant cloud of glory, not only in a thundering voice from heaven, but gently and quietly, with a hand laid on our shoulder, with a voice that quiets the fear. God's glory and majesty and power are beyond all our human understanding. But God is willing to shed all of that power and majesty and glory in order for us to recognize God's love and mercy. The measureless power that made the heavens and the earth concentrates in a hand reaching out to us.

“Be raised. Do not be afraid.”

When Jesus first called Peter, James and John to be his disciples, they were fishing, mending nets. Little did they know what was in store for them. Little did they know that

they would witness healing and miracles. Little did they know they would climb a mountain and see Jesus transfigured before them. Little did they know they would hear God's voice thundering from a bright cloud. Little did they know what still lay ahead of them.

So now it is time to come down from the mountain peak. Because it is in the daily struggle of work and family life and community where God reaches out to us. There is much that lies ahead, down here at the foot of the mountain. We are standing at the edge of the 40 days of Lent. 40 days that, once again, connect Jesus back to Moses. In the next 40 days, we will join Peter, James, John and the other disciples on the journey that leads them with Jesus to the cross and beyond, to the empty tomb.

Today on the high mountain and in the days to come, Jesus, the Word of God, calls you to his service. Calls you to be still and listen for God's voice. Calls you to follow where he leads. Calls you to step away from fear and to be raised into a whole new life. Comes to you in water, wine and bread with the promise that he will never leave you.

Be raised. Do not be afraid. God is with you.