Sermon: “Scared to death” (Matthew 17:1–9)

Dan Mueller, 26th Feb 2017, Transfiguration

Text

Matthew 17:1-9 LEB

1 And after six days Jesus took along Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothing became bright as the light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with him. 4 So Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here! If you want, I will make here three shelters, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” 5 While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!” 6 And when the disciples heard this, they fell down on their faces and were extremely frightened. 7 And Jesus came and touched them and said, “Get up and do not be afraid.” 8 And when they lifted up their eyes they saw no one except him — Jesus alone. 9 And as they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them saying, “Tell no one the vision until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”

Sermon

Introduction

What are you afraid of? Is there anything or any situation that “scares you to death”? The disciples fell down, scared to death

Our Gospel reading is from Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration of Jesus. As always, Matthew has a deep concern for the disciples and the fledgling Christian community. We see this in verses 5 and 6 where Matthew tells us of the disciples fear:

5 While [Peter] was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!”
And when the disciples heard this, they fell down on their faces and were extremely frightened.

Other English translations have:

- They fell on their faces and were terrified (ESV).
- They fell to the ground and were overcome by fear (NRSV).
- They fell flat on their faces, scared to death (Message).

The disciples hear the voice of God and fall down, scared to death.

This got me thinking: Why did the disciples fall down? Why exactly were they terrified?

As I was meditating on this I was struck how the word “fear” can have two related reactions: (a) fear in terms of showing reverence and awe; or (b) fear in terms of dread and anxiety. And I think there’s a mixture of both here in the disciples actions.

1. God is holy

See God is holy and righteous. The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, uses various word pictures to depict God's holiness.

Our Old Testament reading uses the picture of fire:

17 To the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, the glory of the LORD appeared at the summit like a consuming fire. (Exodus 24:17 NLT)

Fire makes things pure and holy. Everything in the presence of fire is either burnt up or purified and made holy. Impure metal can be purified by repeatedly melting it, removing the impurities over time as the process is repeated. God is holy, like consuming fire that removes all impurities.

Our theme verses from Psalm 99 use another picture to describe God's holiness: the picture of a King:

1 The LORD is king! Let the nations tremble! He sits on his throne between the cherubim. Let the whole earth quake! 2 The LORD sits in majesty in Jerusalem, exalted above all the nations. 3 Let them praise your great and awesome name. Your name is holy! (Psalm 99:1–3 NLT)

When a king speaks, the nations tremble. In the ancient world, a king would sit on his throne an issue edicts: when he spoke, things happened. The king held the power of life and death; his proclamations would impact the livelihoods (and even lives) of his subjects. When a king spoke, the subjects listened, trembling in reverent fear.

So here on the Mount of Transfiguration, we see the glory of God like the consuming fire of the sun, and his voice booming from the cloud: “This is my beloved Son.”
In the presence of this Most Holy God it is no wonder the three disciples fall to the ground in fear, trembling at his holy, great, and awesome name — scared to death of what might happen.

2. We are sinful

I find it interesting that Matthew not only tells us the disciples were terrified and they fell down, but how they fell down:

They fell down on their faces (Matthew 17:6).

There’s a few different ways to fall on your face:

1. You might trip and accidentally fall on your face — I don’t think that’s the case here.
2. Falling on your face can be a sign of worship — like the Middle-Eastern custom of praying. I think being in the presence of the Most Holy God, like consuming fire and with booming voice, could have that sort of effect. But I think there’s something more going on.
3. Falling on your face is a way of hiding — you hide your face when you are afraid and ashamed, scared of being found out or discovered.

When my kids have done something they know they shouldn’t, they tend to avoid eye contact — looking away.

I think there’s some of this going on with the disciples.

In the presence of the Most Holy God, they know they have impurities that need to be consumed and refined away. They haven’t listened perfectly to the decrees of the King. They’ve wronged others. They’ve wronged their own bodies. They’ve rebelled, wanting to do things their own way, apart from the King.

Peter has just put foot his foot in it again: wanting to prolong this mountain-top experience instead of allowing Jesus to descend and start walking the road to Jerusalem and the cross.

So they fall on the ground, scared to death, hiding their faces. Afraid and ashamed to approach God, to even look at Him.

It makes me wonder how I might fare if I was on the mountain with the disciples. What things am I ashamed of that might make me hide my face from the Most Holy God?

What things are you ashamed of that make you try to hide from God? In what ways have you stuffed up, like Peter, wanting to avoid the embarrassment of the way of the cross?

This fiery Light and booming Voice from heaven is terrifying. We don’t deserve to be in His presence. We are guilty, rebellious, and deserve to be scared to death — literally. The King speaks and we rightly tremble, for we deserve only one edict for our words and actions — the sentence of death. Ultimately we are all afraid of our own mortality: death will come to us at some stage, but the question is what happens next?
Jesus came and touched, raising to life

The disciples are not left in their terrified state, face down on the ground:

7 Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

The “naked” God, the God of fiery Light and booming Voice from heaven, is holy and terrifying. But the “clothed” God, the God who came to be with us (“Immanuel”), the God robed in human body and blood of the person of Jesus, comes gently to his disciples.

Jesus comes and touches them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

Jesus comes and picks them up. He raises his disciples from their deathly posture on the ground, raising them to new life.

Jesus comes with words: “Get up and do not be afraid,” he says. And Jesus comes in physical form, touching them reassuringly.

Likewise, Jesus comes and picks you up. As you lie terrified on the ground in the awesome presence of the Most Holy God, Jesus comes and speaks his Word into your life. He says in your baptism: “I baptise you in my holy name and wash you clean.” And each Sunday, as you revisit your baptism, he says: “I forgive you all your sins.” “Get up and do not be afraid.”

As you lie terrified on the ground in the awesome presence of the Most Holy God, Jesus comes and touches you in Holy Communion. His body and blood, that is the bread and wine, heals your shame; taking away your sin, rebellion, and impurity. “This is my body given for you,” Jesus says, “This is my blood shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins.”

Conclusion

So in this mountain-top encounter with God, two aspects of the Christian walk are symbolised. (1) Firstly, Christian worship. The words of the “naked” God (the fiery Light and booming Voice) convict and condemn us disciples. But through the words and touch of the “clothed” God, Jesus Christ, we are lifted from fear. (2) Secondly, the final resurrection of the dead is symbolised. The glorified Lord, by the power of word and touch, raises his disciples from death to life. Just as in the Transfiguration, at the end of this world, Jesus will come and touch his disciples, raising them to life with the words: “Get up and do not be afraid.” In what ways is Jesus speaking this Word of comfort and peace into your life?

It is very fortuitous we have this account of the Transfiguration on the eve of Lent and Easter. This Lent and Easter we’ll be embarking on a preaching series called “The Servant” looking at the servant figure in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. The Transfiguration is one of the events that the Gospel of Matthew uses to link Jesus with the servant figure in Isaiah. The voice from heaven says: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I delight.” Isaiah 42:1 reads very similar: “Look! here is my servant; I hold him, my chosen one, in whom my soul delights.” Isaiah 42 is one of the texts we’ll meditate on at our upcoming Ash Wednesday service. So I invite you to consider marking the start of our Lenten journey together by attending service at Walla, starting at 7:30pm this Wednesday. And as we journey through
Lent and Easter, may we behold Jesus as the beloved servant, in whom God’s soul delights, and who comes to us with word and touch.

Amen.