

“Overcoming Our Fear of Heights”

Matthew 17:1–9

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Dana’s maternal grandmother was a daredevil. She learned to drive late in life and scared a police officer half to death on two separate occasions during driving tests until he finally passed her without one. She rode a roller coaster long after her hair turned gray. But the writing was on the wall long before these events. There is a picture of her when she was about sixteen at Lookout Mountain in Chattanooga, Tennessee, sitting on the edge of Lover’s Leap with her feet dangling over the ledge. She obviously had no fear of heights.

Dana loved her grandmother, but she did not inherit this quality from her. Dana’s hands would have gotten clammy simply from seeing her grandmother sit on that ledge. In 2008, while spending a week in England, I was able to take Ian and Ali up to the Golden Gallery at the top of St. Paul’s Cathedral, and take in the views, but Dana only made it to the Whispering Gallery, and we almost had to carry her out of it when she looked up and down and started to experience vertigo. Unlike Alleen Gardner, she has a terrible fear of heights.

But I am not that different. My father climbed a mountain near Mount Everest and the face of the Eiger Mountain, and he often parachuted out of planes when he was in the SAS. But I did not inherit this quality from him. I am not acrophobic, but I don’t love heights. I will not be taking up parachuting. And when I took Ian and Ali up to the Golden Gallery, we didn’t linger. We looked around, it was fascinating to see so much of London all at once, and then it was time to go!

Heights can provide perspective. Mountain views especially, like I first experienced on Grandfather Mountain, can be majestic. But our ability to appreciate them depends on our comfort level with heights.

I call attention to this reality today not simply because Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a mountain, though this is a part of the

story, one that echoes the story from Exodus about Moses on a mountain, and we do wonder how they all feel about heights. Are they taking in the view and does it enhance their ability to listen to God? Or are they frightened out of their wits and thus find it more difficult to pay attention? But the reason I call attention to this reality is that sometimes spiritual mountains present challenges as well.

We may think that personal experiences with the Holy are always uplifting and heartwarming, thus creating a kind of spiritual high that is uncomplicated and without challenges. But we are talking about experiences with the Holy, intimate encounters with the Maker of all there is! In our reading from Matthew, when Jesus is transfigured with his face shining and his clothes turning white, and then Moses and Elijah show up, Peter, James, and John keep it together for a while, though Peter talks nonsense about pitching three tents for the holy figures. But when a cloud overshadows them and a voice speaks from it, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” the disciples hit the ground, overcome by fear!

Jesus tells them to get up and not be afraid, just like angels in scripture are always telling people to fear not, but Jesus does this because they are afraid, they have a fear of spiritual heights. The Creator of the universe has spoken to them, from a cloud, perhaps shielding them from more light than they could possibly face, but still spoken to *them*! And if this isn't enough to make their palms a bit clammy and their stomachs clench, God says, “This is my Son; listen to him!” They've been listening, right? Well, no, not really.

Peter has just told Jesus to stop talking about suffering and death, got right in his face and tried to shout him down. They have known he is special, some kind of Messiah, but they don't yet understand what this means. And God's Son, he is God's *Son*? And they've been with him quite a while, listening respectfully at times, arguing vehemently at others. How were they supposed to know?

It's like what happens with some characters in literature and film like Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* and Arya in *Game of Thrones*. They spend a good bit of time with people who have no idea who they are. It creates dramatic irony when the reader or viewer realizes more

than characters in the story. We know more than the disciples do in the moment. They don't realize who Jesus is. They still don't get it, but they are at least awakened to the reality that there is more to Jesus than they thought, and thinking back on their behavior, this unsettles them.

But the truth is any experience with the Holy is humbling and awe-inspiring. I have shared with many of you my experience as a teenager who had not grown up in church but had a growing interest in spiritual things. One evening I prayed, or at least offered what I thought of as a prayer, that if God was real, God would provide a sign of this reality. But almost immediately after thinking this out-loud for any Deity to hear, I wanted to take it back. Could I handle it if such a God decided to show up? Well, God did. I suddenly had an overwhelming sense that I was not alone. There was nothing I could have captured on a video, just an unmistakable sense of presence, Holy Presence, surrounding me.

It was an experience that assured me then and has offered assurance over the years. It was not unsettling, in and of itself. But the anticipation of it was, and it required a certain level of openness and vulnerability, a willingness to overcome the fear of the unknown. That fear continues to exist of the unknown and the known because intimate encounters with God are not like having lunch with a friend, though there are parallels. God offers friendship, but God is still God, God is Holy Other, and God requires something from us in the way of change.

Furthermore, part of our fear is tied not just to all that is involved in spiritual heights, but to the knowledge that not all of life is lived on the mountain. Just before three disciples go up on a mountain with Jesus, Peter rebukes Jesus for talking about suffering and death. Just after they come down, the father of an epileptic son comes to Jesus for help because Jesus' disciples have not been able to heal him. What happens on the mountain may be glorious, but the disciples look pretty bad on both sides of it, and the mountaintop underscores just how bad. It's just one more reason to fear spiritual mountaintops. They underscore what we are missing in everyday life.

Yet, even though we may have many reasons to fear, there is more than ample reason to overcome our fear because mountaintop

experiences are majestic and transforming. For the three disciples on the mountain with Jesus, this experience offers a kind of assurance of God's purpose in Jesus' life and ministry that will stick with them the rest of their lives. This is made clear in our reading from 2 Peter. For Matthew's readers, this experience offers hope at a time when the community had begun to wonder if God's realm would ever be realized. Jerusalem had fallen. The Romans were persecuting Christians. Jesus had not returned. When would God intervene and was God's realm even real? Jesus is God's Son, the story declares, he is to be listened to still.

For us, this story of transfiguration is placed at the end of the season after Epiphany and just before we enter Lent. It provides a last glimmer of light and hope before a season of darkness and reflection, an emotional and spiritual boost for a difficult journey. But the broader message of Jesus' transfiguration and our own mountaintop experiences is a kind of assurance that sustains us amidst all the discouraging realities of life. And let's face it, recent years have been discouraging.

We've always had political tensions in this nation. The only alternatives are autocracy or oligarchy, approaches to government that allow no dissent. But in recent years, we have embarked on a journey into madness, the kind of division where some would sink the ship rather than entertain compromise; a world where things like fact, truth, civility, and decency are no longer valued.

We have lived through the first pandemic in over a hundred years, which means that none of us in this church, except for Gerri Harris, who died last year at 107, have any personal memory of how to deal with this. The direct consequences of COVID-19 have been brutal enough, with millions dying, economies dragged down, and the very nature of community having been uprooted with all of the social and mental health consequences. But because we have experienced this pandemic during a time of political madness, the consequences have been more severe.

Then, we add a war in Ukraine that seems to have no end, a war with significant global consequences, a war that has come after twenty years of involvement in Afghanistan, ongoing conflict in Syria, etc., *ad nauseum*. We add racial tensions and law enforcement challenges. We add all the mass shootings with no national will to make changes. The

poor are getting poorer, the earth is suffering from our abuse, and the church is declining. To say that these have been discouraging years seems like a laughable understatement!

We need a little good news, a little light and hope, some sign that all is not lost, that God is still with us, that life still has purpose, the church has a future and so do we. We need to overcome our fear of spiritual heights and climb whatever mountain we can find. We need not cleverly devised myths, to echo the words of 2 Peter, or simply wishful thinking; we need personal experiences with the Holy that inspire genuine hope, hope that nothing can take away.

Many of these experiences will be intensely personal, like the one I had as a teenager. To have them, we need to be open and vulnerable, willing to overcome our fear of intimacy with God. Our children can lead the way in this regard. They are often more open to the Holy. But it's not just when we are praying quietly that we encounter God, whether in church or anywhere else. It may be while we are serving in the clothing ministry or singing in the choir or talking to someone in a workplace. The key is that we are open and available to God.

And sometimes we experience the Holy together. This seemed to be the case last week as we dedicated the art banner and shaped our replica of it. While we formed an image of community, placing cut-out images of our hands on a poster board we colored, we felt not only the love of each other but the presence of the God who has brought us together. And as we sang, prayed, and reflected on the meaning of community, even practiced what we preach by gathering food for others, something stirred within us — emotions, but more than that, something deeply spiritual, something we will hold onto, a hope that we are and can be something different in this world of madness and discouragement.

Experiences like this are like warm weather in the midst of winter. We know it will get cold again, but spring is coming. We will still be discouraged, but hope will not disappoint. We don't have proof for specific outcomes or a timetable for them, but we do have the majestic mountaintop experience of having felt God's presence and heard God's voice. In the end, that is all we need.