

Jesus' Transfiguration

The Rev. Dr. Peter G.
James

Luke 9

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*...fear is faith's
antonym.*

*Fear
immobilizes
faith.*

What do you fear: heights, hospitals, darkness, dentists, the recession, death, terrorists, aging, teenagers, parents, exams, MSG, flu shots, crowds, bridges, paper cuts, Presbyterians?

I was talking with a couple recently planning a September wedding. The hotel hosting their reception offered this couple a substantial discount for their September 11th date. Evidently, people are now afraid of getting married on 9-11.

A phobia is an exaggerated fear of something. There are at least 300 phobias common enough to have been given a name. Claustrophobia is the fear of closed-in spaces. Astrophobia is the fear of lightning. Aviophobia is the fear of flying. Helminophobia is the fear of worms. Nycophobia is the fear of darkness. Ophidiophobia is the fear of snakes. Triskaidekaphobia is the fear of the number 13. Friday the 13th is considered an unlucky day. Some buildings number their floors in such a way as to skip the 13th floor. Most athletes refuse to wear a uniform with the number 13.

Doubt is often regarded as the antithesis of faith. But doubt can be a catalyst for faith. Perhaps fear is faith's antonym. Fear immobilizes faith.

In God's Big Story, Jesus brings redemption to people. We explored, last Sunday, Jesus' offer of redemption ministry to three fishermen, Peter, James and John. This trio comprises the inner core of Jesus' disciples and enjoys a private audience with Jesus at decisive points in his ministry. When Jesus anguishes over his impending sacrifice in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter, James and John are there to share it with him.

Jesus goes to a remote mountain for prayer, taking Peter, James and John with him. (Mountains in the Bible are often places of divine revelation.) While they are praying, Jesus' appearance changes (Luke 9:29). Jesus' clothes begin to glow; a radioactive Jesus, you might call him. The gospel writers call it a transfiguration. The Greek word, metamorpho~~tha~~, is where we derive our English word metamorphosis. It's as if the veil of Jesus' humanity is peeled back so his disciples can see a glimpse into the future glory of the risen Christ. This vision serves as a preview of coming attractions in Jesus' life.

Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appear to be talking with Jesus (9:30). There they are, the Mt. Rushmore of the Bible—Moses the law-giver, Elijah the prophet and Jesus the Messiah. Together, Moses and Elijah represent the law and the

We don't want suffering, we want success.

prophets, common terminology for the Old Testament. They appear to be talking with Jesus about his earthly departure (9:31). Exodus would be another name for his departure. Given Moses' presence on the scene, the parallel to Israel's exodus is hard to miss. In God's Big Story, Moses led Israel on a 40-year exodus from bondage to freedom. Jesus' anticipated death and resurrection constitute a new exodus for the people of God. Jesus will lead his people from bondage to freedom.

In this climactic moment, Peter and his companions are fighting off sleep(9:32). This isn't the only time these three disciples are nodding off at inopportune times. When they accompany Jesus into Gethsemane, they can't seem to keep their eyes open (Luke 22:45-46). I find their sleepiness oddly comforting. If people fall asleep in Jesus' presence, maybe I shouldn't take it personally when people fall asleep during my sermons! Some sermons do pack great sedative power!

When Peter shakes off sleep, suddenly he wants to prolong the experience. "It's a good thing for us to be here. Let's build three booths—one for you [Jesus], one for Moses and one for Elijah (9:33).

Peter would like to enshrine the moment. Peter doesn't take kindly to Jesus talking so much about his impending sacrifice. He would rather forego the pain and take the gain. Some things never change in the church. Who wants to belabor the grim business of talking about

the cross? We don't want suffering, we want success. Bring on the happiness and the blessing!

While Peter babbles on about wanting to memorialize the moment, a dense cloud envelopes the mountain (9:34). Our three amigos become afraid. Out of the midst of the cloud, a voice from heaven, in much the same manner that a voice confirmed Jesus' baptism, declares, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen. Listen to him!" (9:35).

And then, just like that, the cloud evaporates. Moses and Elijah vanish into thin air. How do you explain Jesus' transfiguration?

Fear plays a pivotal role in this story. Fear is the antithesis of faith. Fear is faith's antonym. Fear is what immobilizes faith.

I was driving on Interstate 68 through the mountains of West Virginia some years ago. At the base of the mountain, my car was bathed in bright sunlight, but by the time I reached the summit of the mountain, my car was enveloped in dense fog, so thick it seemed you could cut it with a knife. I couldn't see beyond the hood of my car. I feared a stranded car or stray deer would appear at any moment in the highway and I wouldn't be able to stop. It became positively terrifying!

You may find yourself surrounded in a dense fog right now. The fog may be rolling in, so that you cannot see where you are going. You may be afraid of losing your job or finding a new job. You may be fearful about your marriage or the choices your kids or grandkids are making with their lives. You may be afraid about the economy, of watching

Listening has become a lost art in our culture.

your 401K wither into a 201K. There is simply no end to the things that make us afraid.

Listen to this voice from heaven. “This is my son, whom I have chosen. Listen to him.” Listen is a present imperative verb. We must keep on listening for Jesus.

Do you spend time listening to Jesus’ voice? We spend inordinate amounts of time listening to talking heads and gossip mongers. Do we invest any time listening for Jesus’ voice?

Some of us are awash in noise pollution. Our satellite radios and surround-sound plasma TVs talk incessantly, 24-7. Our Blackberries and iphones have become our electronic companions.

Educators lament the loss of active listening skills in the classroom. Listening has become a lost art in our culture. We are so busy making sure people hear what we have to say that we forget to listen. We are better talkers than listeners.

While other people are talking, we’re not really listening. We’re busy formulating a response.

You’ll never hear Jesus if you are not listening for him. Maybe he is speaking into your life, but you are not listening.

In George Bernard Shaw’s play *Saint Joan*, Joan of Arc is always hearing voices from God, which annoys the king greatly. He complains to her, “Oh, your voices! Your voices! Why don’t your voices come to me? I’m the king, not you!”

“They do come,” she replies. “But you do not hear them. You’ve not sat in the field in the evening

listening for them. When the Angelus rings, you cross yourself and are done with it. But if you prayed from your heart...you would hear the voices as well as I do.”

Listen to Jesus’ word in Scripture. If you want to hear Jesus’ words, read what he says. The four gospels supply us with the words of Jesus.

The Bible tells us what God says. That’s why we call it God’s Word. People think the Bible only gives us information about God. Not so. The Bible communicates God’s Word.

Let me issue you a challenge. Read the gospel of Luke this week. Since the book is divided into 24 chapters, by reading two chapters every day, you can complete it in less than two weeks. I don’t mean speed-read it, but take the time this week to meditate on what Jesus says. Read the Word slowly and thoughtfully to see whether Jesus’ words begin to speak to you.

Listen to Jesus speaking through his followers. Share company with people who know Jesus best. We want to help you find spiritual friends in this church. We won’t make it without spiritual friends in this world. That’s why we are forming Lenten small groups, to cultivate friends for spiritual conversation.

Listen to Jesus speaking in prayer. Prayer is nothing more than talking with Jesus. Talk to him about the things that make you anxious and relationships that concern you. Speak with him about your life, and see if he doesn’t talk back to you. If you cannot pray, let us pray with you. There are

people willing and ready to pray with you after worship this morning.

Sometimes God speaks, as Elijah the prophet discovered, in a still, small voice. God doesn't only speak in the earthquake, wind and thunder, sometimes God speaks in a gentle whisper.

To listen for Jesus, we must put ourselves in the place of greatest potential. If you want to meet a famous person or that special someone in school, what do you do? You position yourself to be in their line of sight. You orchestrate the situation so they cannot help but see you. If you want to meet President Obama, you are not likely to meet him at a Republican dinner party. You're far more likely to find him in Washington, D.C. than Walla Walla.

If you want to meet Jesus, you must put yourself in the place of greatest potential. Read his Word. Hang around his followers. Talk to him in prayer.

***If you want to meet Jesus,
you must put yourself in
the place of greatest
potential.***