

Sermon Transfiguration 2018

February 11, 2018

Mark 9:2-9

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, especially these words: **“they were terrified.”**

To understand the disciples’ terror at the transfiguration doesn’t require much to imagine, does it? After all, as I often make the connection in classes, I say, if I were to stand up before you and you were to see me transfigured—metamorphosed as Mark tells us—if you were to see my face start shining like the sun, and my clothes shimmering with the radiance of God’s glorious light, I can imagine it would be memorable for you all to say the least. After all, it’s not the kind of thing that happens every day, right? But while it was actually happening, how would you respond? And I want you to seriously think about that for a minute. This really is a bit hard to consider because it’s so different from what we witness on daily basis, but how would you respond? I am guessing that more than a few of you would be afraid, wouldn’t you? I am guessing some of you would probably even be afraid to talk to me after the service. It would be utterly terrifying.

Well, that’s what we see the disciples doing with Jesus. In fact, there are many times we see the disciples responding this way with Jesus, many times when we see Him demonstrate His divinity and they are afraid. We see it here. We see it when He walks on water. We see it when He controls the storm. We see it when He shows He is God, and what do they do? They fear Him and worship Him. And what we see in Scripture is that there is something right about this. As Psalm 111 says, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” If we want to start to be wise we should fear God. Jesus Himself says this when He tells us that we should fear not those who can hurt the body, but the One who can cast us both body and soul into Hell.

But that makes us ask, why is it good to fear God? Well to start, especially as we think about what Jesus says there about fearing those who can harm the body less than the One who can cast body and soul into Hell, what is Jesus saying there? He’s saying that if you’re more scared of what God’s going to do you than what other people think, you’ll care more about what He wants than what they want. This is like what I remember growing up to be like. I remember growing up, I was always afraid to get in trouble. I was more afraid of getting in trouble than I was afraid of people not

thinking I was cool for something. I was more afraid of getting in trouble than worrying about whether people didn't think I was cool for not going to this or that party, or for not smoking pot, or doing this thing or that thing. I was honestly more afraid of getting in trouble with my parents than with my teachers or even the police. That helped to keep me from making some really dumb decisions. So this is where that fear is good: it sort of keeps us in line. It helps curb our sin—that first use of the Law, if you remember.

But ultimately this fear is good, because it reminds us of our relationship to God. It reminds us that we are sinners and that God is the God who could, and who should destroy us in that sin. In other words, it keeps us humble. It reminds us that we have no right to go up to God and tell Him that we think that He's doing a crummy job and we think He should do X,Y, and Z better. That fear reminds us that He is God, and even though in our sin we like to think we are, or that we could do it better, ultimately, we're not God and He does it right.

In fact, as we think about this fear, not only do we hear of it throughout Scripture, but we even see it in this story about Moses. Did you catch that? Here is this story about Moses, and it's one that sort of pre-figures Jesus' transfiguration—that is it kind of gives us a picture of it from long ago, and here Moses goes up and talks to God and He comes back down and talks to the people, and his face reflects that Glory that he has been exposed to in talking with God. And how do the people react then? Did you catch it? **They were afraid to come near him.** Moses' face shined with the glory of God, and so they were afraid to come near him. They were afraid even of Moses!

Now as I say this, this is sort of funny because this is exactly what they had wanted because if you recall, they had asked for Moses to be the one to talk to them. Do you remember that? They had received the Ten Commandments, and when God gave the Ten Commandments, He spoke directly to the Israelites. That's part of the reason the Ten Commandments are so important: they are the only words that God spoke directly to the people. But do you recall how they reacted? They were terrified and they told Moses never to let that happen again. They said, "Moses you talk to us, but don't let God talk to us again, because it was way too scary." And now here Moses is talking to them, and their still afraid. Why? Because Moses reflects that glory of God. Moses reflects the glory that Jesus showed on the Mount of Transfiguration, and they were all afraid!

Now at this point I've been talking a lot about this fear. I've described how this is a good thing. I've talked about how it's good because it can kind of keep us in line, I've been talking about how it's good because we see it all the time in Scripture. And to be honest, I think this is good for us to talk about because in our day we often are so lacking in our fear of God. We have so minimized God that we picture Him like our big friend in college who maybe had a temper but as a whole was really just a sweet teddy bear and so we didn't really have to be afraid of him. And as we've created this image of God, we've done ourselves a disservice. We've decided in that, that we can make God something that we want Him to be, and wrongly decided the He is someone we just bend to our own will. And Christians, I know you know this isn't true, but it's good for us to be reminded of it. It's good for us to be reminded that a bit of healthy fear of God is helpful, to be reminded that when we step into this house we are stepping into a place set apart for a holy purpose. To be reminded that when we leave this house we are those who belong to this God and we have been made holy and are set apart in that holiness—set apart in the life of loving and serving our neighbor and not for serving our own needs. This is good for us to remember. But as I say all of this even, we have to ask ourselves, what does this fear really do for us in and of itself? If we only fear God, what does that do?

Or maybe I should flip that and ask, if we only fear God, what are we not also inherently doing? Now I want you to ponder that for a minute—although not too long, because it's a bit of guess what the pastor is thinking question—but if we only fear God what are we not doing? Think about the Catechism for a minute, about the explanations for the Commandments especially. What does Luther say we should do? Should we only fear God? No. We should fear Him, and we should love Him, and we should trust Him. If we only fear God, we're not loving or trusting in Him. And there we see just how far this will go.

But as I say that, this fear helps us to understand how to approach Him as we trust in Him. And that's important that we do know to approach Him, because when we fear God because we know we have a problem—namely sin—that keeps us from coming to Him, it can be easy to run from Him. In fact, this is the point that I was getting at last week just stated in another way. If we only know God by the glory He shows in His power, in His power in creation, and in His power in healing, that doesn't do us any good because we don't know what He thinks about us. This is the same. If we only know God according to His majesty, and so fear Him, we can easily think that

we should turn tail and run from Him. But what do we know? We know that He will find us. So what do we do?

We come to Him. But maybe we should consider that this fear means that we don't just come to Him however we think would be fitting. Maybe we don't come to Him by meeting Him on a mountainside in the glory of creation. Maybe we don't meet Him by just feeling Him in our hearts. Maybe we come to Him where He promises to tell us what He thinks. What do I mean? I mean this. How do you know that God is someone you can approach? You know this because of Jesus, right? But do you know this because of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration? No, you know this because of Jesus on the Mount of Calvary. You know this because of Jesus who suffered for your sins, bloodied for them on the cross, dying for them so that in His resurrection you would have absolution. That's how you know you can come to God, because you are absolved, your sins are forgiven. Have you thought about that in relation to why we have Confession and Absolution at the beginning of the Service? At the beginning of every Service? Because in Absolution, that fear that you shouldn't come before God, that tainting of your conscience that sin brings—and by that I mean both your own sins against God, but also the sins others commit against you, because those taint your conscience as well—absolution tells you that Jesus has forgiven you and cleansed you even of those sins. And now you know how you can approach God. You can approach Him in the promise of your baptism. You can approach Him in confidence. You can even come this way—still reverently, still in awe, and even in fear—but you can come in confidence—in love and trust—that when He meets you here He gives you His own body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. He doesn't do this that you would be destroyed—although Scripture tells us not to come irreverently or treating it lightly—no He does this that you would know of that love, that perfect love that drives out fear.

So Christians, as we reflect on this, we see then what this fear does. We see that these disciples saw Jesus in this glory and were terrified, and rightly so. We see that this applies to us. But we see that this fear prepares us to enter into God's presence to hear what He ultimately has to tell us: that this Jesus who has all of this power and majesty has set that aside to forgive our sins. To tell us that He wants us to come to Him, to be cleansed of the sin which taints us, and live with Him in that glory, the glory that like I said last week is proclaimed to you that you would know it is for you, and that glory that truly is His love. Amen.