
'Twas Grace that Taught My Heart to Fear

Matthew 17:1-8

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 3, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I wonder whether you know what it's like to be terrified. I wonder if you've ever had that twisting screwdriver at the base of your stomach, that trembling shiver under your lower spine, that drying of the throat and tightening of the chest, the instinctive slow shaking of the head and the glazed staring of the eyes that says "Oh... my... God."

I want to take you into the mind's eye of Peter, James and John after they followed the Jesus they thought they knew up a mountain. They saw his face transfigured into a dazzling white, and they saw the Old Testament creak open and Moses and Elijah walk out of its pages, good as new, and park themselves either side of Jesus. And then a big cloud came over like a flyover at the Superbowl and the sky started speaking – that's right, the sky started speaking – about being Jesus' father. And the three disciples did the obvious thing – they ran behind the sofa because they were terrified out of their tiny minds.

I want to talk today about fear. And then I want to talk about what the transfiguration story teaches us about fear.

Fear isn't itself good or bad. It's an emotion that identifies what we love. The quickest way to discover what or who someone loves is to find out what they are afraid of. We fear because we don't want to lose what we love. We fear intensely when we love intensely or when we think what or who we love is in real danger. So a world without fear wouldn't be a good thing, because it wouldn't just be a world without danger – it would be a world without love.

If you think back to times of intense fear, sometimes it's so horrible you can't bear to think about it. But sometimes it's different. Sometimes those fearful moments are periods when you feel most fully alive. I think that's because at those moments you're most aware of the things and the people you love. When you feel death or danger is near, you want to be with the people that matter in the places that matter and you want to squeeze hands and hold people close and tell them what you need to tell them. After years of ignoring, forgetting or neglecting those who mattered most, fear sometimes puts you right in touch with them. Sometimes you even feel a profound bond with even complete strangers, based on common need or humanity. And maybe afterwards you or they wish that a lot more of life could be like that.

So there can be a good aspect to fear. But there can also be a bad aspect to fear. If we try to define what fear is, we may get a little closer to recognizing that bad aspect to fear. The great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas tells us the object of fear is a future evil that is imminent, of great magnitude, and threatening the loss of something we rightly love. I'll say that again because I want to talk a bit about it: the object of fear is a future evil that is *imminent*, of great *magnitude*, and threatening the loss of something we *rightly love*. Using this definition, we can quickly see four ways in which our fears can become disordered and even manipulated by those who benefit from our being paralyzed by fear.

Let's start with the word *imminent*. The amazing thing about television is that it can make a threat in Kabul or Baghdad seem as close as a threat in Chapel Hill. This would be a fine thing if it led to thoughtful and unsentimental compassion but in reality it more often leads to disordered fear. It's not hard to argue that our troops are currently fighting a demoralizing war in Iraq because the nation was led to believe in a threat of great magnitude which was in fact not imminent at all. TV news brings us threats of great magnitude every day from all round the world: but in reality few if any of them are imminent dangers in North Carolina. Global warming is undoubtedly a matter of great magnitude: but it is not an imminent danger, so the response should not be panicky, but measured, substantial and thoughtful.

Then there's the question of magnitude. When you're sitting on an airplane and it goes through some turbulence, the threat is clearly imminent, because you're stuck on the plane and you can't get off. But the threat isn't of great magnitude, because if you do the math you can work out that most planes go through

turbulence on most journeys and a very tiny number indeed actually fall out of the sky. Shootings in school are terrible events, which feel imminent if you take a child to school each day, but statistically they are in fact very rare tragedies indeed. But it's very easy to lose your sense of proportion and be overcome by fear.

What makes you lose your sense of proportion is that these things seem to threaten something we genuinely love. There are plenty of things out there that are imminent and of great magnitude but don't in fact threaten anything we genuinely love. You could take immigration as an example. It's imminent, because the demography of Durham is changing every year; and it's of great magnitude, because we're talking about enormous numbers of people. But I don't believe it's a threat to anything we love. I speak as an immigrant and a child of an immigrant and a grandchild of an immigrant. This is a nation that was built on immigration and it's a nation that will continue to be enriched by immigration. It doesn't take a photograph from space to show that the United States is far from full. Those who have the initiative to come here, often against great odds, are likely to be people who will contribute immensely to the nation's wellbeing, provided they're welcomed and treated with dignity.

And that raises the last word of the definition, something we *rightly* love. You don't need me to tell you that for generations the politics of the American South was a politics of fear, but it was a *disordered* fear, because it appealed to things some people were persuaded they loved but did not rightly love, things like the so-called Southern way of life – which was so often simply a euphemism for segregation. Yes, some people no doubt loved segregation and therefore feared the imminent change of great magnitude that eventually brought it to an end. But they did not *rightly* love it, because segregation was not a proper object of love.

We live in a time when politics is once again dominated by fear, and we live in a year when presidential candidates claim to be able to take away fear by somehow abolishing it. The phrase “War on Terror” suggests fear is something you can somehow kill. But our witness as Christians is to say that in some ways fear is a good thing, because it discloses our love. We show our faith precisely in the way we respond to fear, and in the way we show our love.

Let's get back to the Transfiguration, now armed with Thomas Aquinas' definition of fear. The disciples looked at Jesus transfigured alongside Moses and Elijah, with the thundering voice from heaven declaring Jesus' unique identity and unlimited authority: “This is my beloved Son: listen to him.” They were terrified. Too right they were: because what they saw and heard was something imminent, of great magnitude, which was transforming something they rightly loved. They thought they knew Jesus. They knew he was something special. He'd been voted MVP – Most Valuable Prophet – two seasons running. If it was today he'd have been on talk-shows and T-shirts and YouTube by now. But this was something terrifying. Jesus was joined by the two biggest-name alumni in the Old Testament – and the whole of the history of Israel was present in him. Meanwhile Jesus was blessed and authorized by the voice of God, and clearly the whole presence and power of God was in him. He was the place where the closest humanity had ever come to God met the closest God had ever come to humanity. Not surprising the disciples' legs turned to jelly. All the heightened awareness, all the hugging of strangers, all the screwdriver tummy and the shivering lower spine, all the realizing what they truly love and wanting to cling to what most matters – it's all here, because these disciples realize that *they're looking at the nature and destiny of humankind, straight in the face*. In England they'd say “They were a touch overawed.” Here in North Carolina we'd say, “Ma[y]-an.”

I want to look now at what happens next in the story. This is where we discover what Jesus does about fear. He does four things. I'm going to read you verse 7 from just after the disciples fell on their faces in fear. “But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’” In other words, Jesus does four things. He comes to them. No shouting from afar, no ridiculing, so criticizing, no embarrassing, no trivial saying “Hey, you guys, I guess you don't know my friends Mo and Eli – Moses this is Pete, Elijah this is Jamie...” – no, none of that. Jesus comes to them. He makes the first move. He makes the journey across their fear.

And then secondly it says Jesus touched them. Did you notice that? He *touched* them. I'll never forget the moment when I was told my mother was about to die. I was 18 years old and 3000 miles away. Of course I was in pieces. A man I hardly knew started telling me mindless irrelevances about when his grandmother had died, but none of it mattered because what he did was to cup my hands in his and to look at me and hold me. He

touched me. And I was not so afraid. And ever since then when I've trained people for ministry and discipleship I've said to them, "Maybe the most important thing in your ministry will not be what you say but the way you learn to hold people and to touch them when they are afraid." And so I look back at what Jesus does here and see that he touched each of the disciples before he said anything. He made the journey across their fear and he held them in the midst of their fear by touching them.

Only then does he speak. First he says "Get up." Now this is interesting. The disciples are obviously still petrified. But Jesus has come to them and touched them. So now it's time for them to get up. Jesus encourages them to get up while they're still frightened. I wonder if these words mean anything to you. *Jesus invites them to get up while they're still frightened.* He knows they're still frightened. But, frightened or not, it's time to get up. In the language we used earlier, the disciples have realized what they rightly love, but they are gradually realizing that what they rightly love is not genuinely threatened. It's just magnified beyond anything they could previously imagine and closer to them than they could ever have known. That's a lot to take in, but the best place to do it isn't face down on the ground.

And then finally Jesus says "Don't be afraid." This hardly needs saying after the previous three things have taken place – Jesus comes to them, touches them, and raises them to their feet. They look up and they see what was there at the beginning of time and what will be there at the end of time: nothing but Jesus, nothing but God's life so shaped as to be present to us. In the words of the old hymn, 'twas *grace* that had caused the disciples' hearts to fear. They were overwhelmed by nothing other than grace. And now it's grace *relieving* their fears, grace in the face of Jesus Christ. 'Twas grace that caused my heart to fear, and grace my fears reliev'd. What they were afraid of turned out to be Jesus. And Jesus was there to touch them, raise them and send them on their way.

And now we can see what has just taken place in this fourfold action of coming, touching, raising and empowering. It's a microcosm of the whole gospel story. Jesus first *comes* to us in his incarnation. Jesus then *touches* us in his teaching and healing ministry. And then in his cross and resurrection and in the coming of his Spirit at Pentecost Jesus *raises us up* and *clothes us with power* and gives us reason not to be afraid. The whole gospel is in this single verse: and the verse begins with the disciples face down on the ground in terror. So if you've come to this place this morning feeling like those disciples, feeling like hiding behind the sofa because the truth is against you or putting your face down to the ground because reality is too much for you, then hear the gospel of Jesus Christ today. Jesus comes to you. Jesus touches and holds you. Jesus gently puts you back on your feet. And Jesus says to you, "Don't be afraid."

Every time we pray, this story can shape what we hope for and what we think we're doing. We always come before God with fear: fear that our lives and our troubles are so large and looming and God won't be *enough* for us, fear that our lives and our troubles are so trivial and foolish and God will be too *much* for us. Like the disciples, our heads are down and our face is in our hands. And as we pray Jesus comes to us. He makes that long journey of incarnation *every single time* we lie face down in fear. And Jesus touches us. He comes in scripture, in insight, in pictures, in words, in wisdom, in kindness, but most of all in tender, uncomplicated, human form. And then Jesus tells us it's time to finish praying and get up. And then there's only one thing stopping us from setting about his business. And he deals with that by saying, "Don't be afraid."