

Matthew 17:1-9

"But when the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome with fear. But Jesus touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'"

What is the scariest thing you have ever experienced in your life?

Ask Jimmy Buffett what terrifies him the most, and he might tell you in song it's "Vampires, mummies and the holy ghost."

Ask me, I would tell you it was the time in seminary, as I was on my way from Louisville Seminary to my student position in Newburgh, Indiana when I lost control of my tiny Datsun B210 compact tin can of a car at 70 miles an hour. I hit a patch of ice, and spun totally out of control, heading towards a concrete overpass pillar. By some miracle, the car spun into the median, lurched sideways a hands width from it, breaking only my coffee cup.

What about you?

This past week, the scariest thing many pray Americans will never happen in their community or school or workplace, happened yet again for the 68th time in 2023, when a gunman once again opened fire, this time on the campus of Michigan State University, killing 3 students and wounding 8 others.

The following day, during a vigil, the students were asked if they were scared, those in attendance, all held up their hands.

Two of the students who witnessed the shooting were also victims of previous school shootings. One at her high school in Oxford, Michigan just a little over a year before. The other was an elementary student at Sandy Hook.

Staci's church, Common Grace, will be volunteering at Brat Fest. The woman who is helping to organize it for their church wrote her an email, explained she will be helping with the set-up and clean-up, but is not comfortable volunteering during Brat Fest itself. She went on to explain her daughter was in attendance at the Highland Park, Illinois July 4th Parade and witnessed the gunman opening fire, killing 7 and wounding dozens of others. While she was not in the crowd herself, she told Staci she now more fearful of being in big crowds.

Ironically, after each mass shooting, gun sales increase and gun manufacturers and the gun lobby profit from each one of these tragedies.

Still, our elected officials do nothing, and some Americans continue to arm themselves with all kinds of guns, fearful of an unexpected attack by

unknown assailants who mean to harm us, including followers of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Of course, being a victim of gun violence isn't the fear we face in our nation. Fear seems to be gripping us in many other ways. We fear books so we ban them. We fear learning about our nation's history from different perspectives, so we pass laws preventing it from being taught in schools. We fear people's sexuality and pronouns. We fear immigrants and refugees.

We fear others who are not like us, unless you are "them," then you, as them, can fear "us." Which means we can fear each other, and we do, don't we. It's crazy to live in such fear of one another, when we here believe God is in each person. Or maybe you don't believe that, really?

Trivial as some might think of your fears, they are very real to you. And we must acknowledge that truth.

Yet, I wonder if what we really fear is the one thing that we cannot control; the one thing we are powerless to stop, the one thing that all the guns we buy, laws we pass, walls we seek to erect, wealth we accumulate cannot prevent from happening in our lives because ultimately we are not in control of life? And that my friends is death.

We are ultimately not in control of our own deaths and we fear facing death the most.

And death and dying is where we find ourselves this morning as we once again gather up on the mountain with Peter, James and John, to experience the wonder and mystery of the Transfiguration of Jesus.

Each of the Gospels tells us about this experience in which Jesus is mystically or magically or mysteriously "Transfigured" somehow, joined by the long deceased Moses and Elijah, who are shrouded by a bright cloud from which the voice of God speaks, saying: "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!"

I don't know about you, but personally, if that happened to me, I might wet myself with fear, and fall down out of the sheer terror of it all!

Jesus seeing that they were overcome with fear reaches out to them, touches them and says, and I really like this, "Get up and do not be afraid."

As I said, the thing we seem to most fear above all our other fears is the unknown mystery of death.

And here in the Transfiguration, we find ourselves, like the disciples facing the unknown mystery which involves two dead men and one, Jesus, who is as good as dead if he heads down the mountain.

And that is exactly where he is headed, down the mountain, and right into the heart of the political power where Rome and Religion meet and death awaits him - Jerusalem.

How about I end my sermon here, safely clinging to the beauty and mysterious of this Thin Place, as the Celts called it, where heaven and earth meet. Because if I go on, we will have to face our fears, and like Jesus, confront the powers that be, and stare death in the eyes, and suffer in love for all the world.

The great Greek philosopher, Plato, said: **“We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.”**

I think Plato was on to something. If Jesus had not reached out and touched Peter, saying: **“Get up and do not be afraid”** I think he would have stayed up there, hiding behind all that he feared in life, and all that he feared in facing death.

Here is something for us to remember, even as we hear Jesus’ words: “Get up and do not be afraid.” In all of the Scriptures, there are over 365 times when people are faced with a situation that terrifies them, making them fear for their lives. It is in each of those 365 moments either the Messengers of God or Jesus says: “Do Not Be Afraid!” “Do not Fear!” “Fear Not!”

Over 365 times! And here it is one more time this morning.

Here is what I think about fear. They are, as I said, very real and need to be acknowledged. But they cannot consume us for our fears bear no life-giving fruits, love does.

Fear enslaves us. Love frees us.

Fear leads us to write laws, build walls, arm ourselves with guns, develop religious doctrines, and segregate ourselves from others using religious liberty as excuse to do so.

Sacred Love does not do these things. God’s love gives us the courage to beat our swords into plowshares and guns into life-giving instruments of healing and hope.

Christ’s love frees us to live in community with one another as God intended us to live.

Love as God revealed the fullness of love in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, is what we are bound to in our lives as believers – not doctrines or creeds or law – and most especially not fear!

Which is why Jesus reached out, touched Peter, James, and John, saying: "Get up and do not be afraid" and then with them, headed down the mountain into Jerusalem to face the powers that be and death.

So here we are sitting comfortably in our beautiful little sanctuary, safely ensconced in our pews, yet knowing, if we are truly disciples of Christ, then we too must heed his words: "Get up and do not be afraid" and head out the doors, back into a world that frankly, terrifies us very much, and yet needs us ever so much more to be the living, loving presence of the Risen One, who lived, loved, suffered, faced death, and dying, rose again.

If we truly believe that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ; if we too are to do justice, act with compassion, and walk humbly with God;

if we are truly to be agents of God's healing grace, bringing about the reconciliation and peace of God's Kingdom;

if we believe God is in all people, male and female, all over the world;

if we believe we are all created in God's own sacred image;

if we believe that in the end there will be no more injustice, suffering, pain, sorrow and death, and that all things will be made new again;

if we truly believe that in Christ, life always answers death - if we believe all these things, hope all these things, are willing to love one another because we believe all these things - then "Get up, as Jesus says, and let us go out, face our fears and those who terrify us, armed not with guns and words of hatred or policies that ban books or discriminate against others because of the color of their skin, gender or sexuality or religion, but only with the love, grace and compassion of Christ, and do not be afraid!"

Amen!