

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Get On With It”

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### **Matthew 17:1-9**

*17Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup>Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ <sup>5</sup>While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’ <sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup>But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ <sup>8</sup>And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.*

*9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, ‘Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’*

Mountaintop experiences are generally thought to be uplifting, motivating and inspirational. I must admit that I miss dearly the view from the front windows of my former home in Salt Lake City, the beautiful and close at hand Wasatch Mountains. Such a sight was one to create in me a sense of wonder and awe each and every day. But there is another side to the view from and of inspiring mountaintops.

Consider this story. Once upon a time a Kansas farmer sold his 400 acres of land and moved to Colorado. He bought a condo in a lovely little community in full view of the Rocky Mountains. As the days and weeks passed he began to see familiar faces on the streets. He got to know many new neighbors and they became his friends. The locals were all quite proud of their mountains (that’s what people out west call them, “their mountains” as if they own them) and they knew that this farmer had never seen anything but level prairie all of his life. They wondered why he never commented on the beauty of the mountains, and over time his silence began to bother them. One day, a neighbor got up the nerve to ask the farmer what he was thinking. “Charlie,” he said, “you’ve been here a couple of months now. Whadda think of our mountains? Pretty impressive, aren’t they?” Charlie looked at the snow-capped peaks piercing the deep blue sky and thought for a good, long moment. Finally he spoke slowly but with great confidence. “Well, I suppose they are all right. But they do tend to block the view, don’t they?”

This morning’s Scripture lesson, the traditional lesson for the last Sunday in Epiphany, speaks of a mountaintop experience, the transfiguration of Jesus. Perhaps like Charlie, after reflecting upon it ourselves, we might have a different feeling about how such high places affect us. This mountaintop experience of Jesus is described in quite similar fashion in each of the gospels. Jesus, along with a handful of disciples, goes up a mountain to be by himself. Suddenly, his face and garments begin to shine as white as snow. The disciples see Moses and Elijah, the Hebrew connections to sacred law and prophecy, talking with Jesus. They are not quite certain what to do. Peter suggests building a couple of tents to capture the moment.

Finally a voice comes down from heaven, echoing the promise of Jesus' baptism saying, "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."

But the gospel of Matthew's version offers an additional emotion to the scene. Matthew talks about a possible negative aspect of the mountaintop experience. He describes the fear of the disciples. "They fell to the ground and were overcome by fear." Imagine being there with Peter and James and John. For them, the transfiguration of Jesus was not a comforting moment. It was more like a frightening dream; blinding white gowns, the appearance of ghostly figures, and voices coming from unknown places. It must have left the disciples wondering what this Jesus was all about and fearful about what following him was all about. It could not have been a comforting moment.

Now some people are quite comfortable being afraid. Some of you will even pay money to be frightened. There are those who enjoy reading Stephen King novels. Some people can't wait for Halloween, thrilled to walk through a haunted house, to have someone with an axe jump out at them- all just to be scared. There are people who will stand in line for over an hour at an amusement park to be flipped upside down and dropped from great heights at breakneck speed. Every time I see an advertisement for a horror movie I ask myself, "Who would possibly want to go see that?" But somebody does.

Whenever I think of fear, it is not something wonderful. I can remember listening to my Grandma Chris' scary stories by candlelight on Halloween night as a child. I would have to go home and hide underneath my covers for fear of the ghosts and goblins she was describing. When I think of fear I think of a feeling of uneasiness, of worry about what will come next. Fear is not something to be enjoyed rather it is what blocks me from enjoying life. When I am in situations of potential fear, I do my best to keep a safe distance from whatever it is that is frightening me.

Fear and trembling. The vision of God that the disciples encountered with the transfigured Jesus was certainly frightening. No one had even seen such a sight. The God of fear and trembling was usually shielded from humanity. This view of God was not known to man or woman. This was the view of God even turned even the mighty Moses' hair pure white. Such a God was all-powerful, high and exalted, distant and beyond human comprehension. This was a God to fear not necessarily follow.

I recall as a child walking into the kitchen when my mother was preparing dinner. If I saw that she was making certain recipes, I tried to exit quickly. It wasn't because I didn't like the food. It was because I knew she would send me to the basement to get a jar or can of something. When I was young, I dreaded going into that Michigan basement. It was cold and damp and horribly dark. There were spider webs and all sorts of strange noises coming from the crawl space. At one time or another I saw bats and mice and even a snake down there. And worst of all, the cabinet that contained my mother's canned items was in the darkest, scariest corner. I once confided to her that I was afraid to go into the basement alone. Of course being a mother, she had the perfect answer. She told me, "Don't worry. Jesus will be in the cellar with you." I never told her that the thought of Jesus really being in that Michigan basement with me frightened me far more than any bat or spider!

Yet without that frightening mountain of transfiguration, nothing would have changed. We would have continued to be distant from God, perhaps face down and frightened like those three disciples. God would have been a power that we knew about but did not want to really know. But God did not create us to be so distant. God wanted to do something about it. And that something was most evident on the mountaintop. God came among us as one of us, as one who looks like us, walks like us, talks like us, cries like us, and bleeds like us. So, after the dazzling light show, after the heavenly voices, and after the ghostly visions, it is a very real and compassionate Jesus who reaches across the gulf of fear and trembling and touches us saying, "Get up. Do not be afraid." While the transfiguration event clarifies Jesus' divine nature, it is not the glorious, transfigured Jesus that lifts us up. It is the down to earth, human Jesus that puts

us back on our feet and walks us down the mountain to be with us in the midst of our human doubt and pain and uncertainty.

I recall a column written by the late Erma Bombeck about a little boy named Donald on his first day of school. She wrote, "My name is Donald and I don't know anything. I have new underwear, a loose tooth, and I didn't sleep last night because I was worried. What if the bell rings and the man yells, 'Where do you belong?' and I don't know where I belong? What if the trays in the cafeteria are too tall for me to reach? What if my loose tooth comes out when we have our heads down and are supposed to be quiet? Am I supposed to bleed quietly? What if I splash water on my name tag and my name disappears and no one knows who I am?"

It strikes me that we might see ourselves before God as little Donald did before his first day of school. Overwhelmed. Confused. Not knowing where to start. Not knowing where to turn when things don't go our way. Immobilized by our fear and inadequacies, left vulnerable to a power who is high and mighty beyond our understanding and who can't possibly understand us. Feeling small in the face of a divine force that is more frightening than friendly. We might be likely to stay on that mountain with our faces down, afraid to go forward.

"Get up and get on with it," God says. "Do not be afraid." God's love is revealed in what we witness in this Jesus. Fear and trembling are not the final words. We do not have to be afraid of the world for God is with us. God picks us up like a mother picks up a child who has fallen while trying to walk, putting us back on our feet and urging us to try again. And we do not need to fear God. God is not above us to humiliate or chastise or punish. God is with us to support us and encourage us even in our imperfect best. God wants us to pick ourselves up and turn our faces once more to the love of Christ than can be experienced even in the midst of our humanity.

Do not cower in fear and awe. Get up and get on with it! Do not be afraid. See the light and love of God in the person of Jesus the Christ. Let that light and love shine through your own face and through your caring actions. May the world see and know the love of God in Jesus Christ as it is made incarnate in you.