



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
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Sermon: “Our Eyes to the Hills”  
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

Exodus 24:12-18  
Matthew 17:1-9

When I was eight years old, I learned how to ski – at least, I thought I did. There was a deal in town for five Saturday morning classes for kids and my mother generously signed me up.

At 6 AM, a bus would come to fetch me and some of the other kids in town. Now, I have never been a morning person, so at 6 AM I was virtually a rag doll. I would lie atop the bed, and Mom would push my legs into my snow pants and swing me over her shoulder to get my boots on. *She was a very patient-strong woman!*

At beginner’s ski class, I learned how to carefully zig-zag down the mountain, to “pizza” my skis to stop, and to get off the chairlift before it whipped back around. At the end of the class series, parents were invited to visit and see all that their beloved children had learned. I was very excited to show my mother all that I had mastered those five formative weeks.

So, as soon as Mom and I got our skis on and took the chair lift up to the top, I headed over to the first trail I saw: it was black diamond (the most advanced hill there).

“Mom, watch me!” I shouted as my hands pushed down on my poles. Now, those very well could have been my last words, because before I knew it, I was rocketing downward on this sharply sloped hill. Instantly panicked, I tried my pizza breaking skills [no help] and my zig-zag talent [no good]. I was going full speed ahead – like it or not.

Through a snowy-mist, I could hear Mom shouting from atop the mountain, and I could see in the distance an orange mesh fence that stretched across that bottom of this hill.

My skis were speeding right towards the fence, and within moments I crashed straight into it - taking the entire thing down with me. As my body lay mangled in-between the mesh, Mom - who was by no means an advanced skier – took a breath and then pushed down hard on her own poles. She fiercely, steadily swerved down this steep mountain to rescue whatever was left of her daughter down below.

Surely, we have each had our share of “mountaintop moments.”

Those instances, when we’ve felt overly-confident: racing down the slope far too quickly without the tools, the skills, or the back-up to make it safely to the bottom; or we’ve been overly-cautious: paralyzed by our fear, unable to get our feet moving; or we’ve been unexpectedly empowered: charging forward without any assurance that we will have what it takes to endure the journey ahead.

With Lent just around the corner, it feels like we have been standing high atop a mountain for some time now. We are still caught up in a polarizing social and political climate, a flurry of mixed messages, fierce disagreements, and hard statements about who’s in and who’s out. It can feel utterly impossible for folks across the aisle, folks across the street to find common ground. Now, more than ever, we are asking ourselves how are we to respond, to act, to move? When should we remain cautious and still, and when should we fearlessly rush down the mountain?

Even in our own lives, we are dealing with the day to day squabbles and worries that rock us to our cores – familial disagreements, hard truths from our doctors, uneasy moments at work or school. Certainly, we are wondering if we have what it takes – as individuals, as a community, as a Church – to navigate the uncertain road ahead and still find reason to hope that we will arrive safely to the foot of the empty tomb on Easter morning.

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The Matthew Gospel writers knew a little – a lot of – something about this too. The 1<sup>st</sup> century ancient world was a time when people were constantly at odds with one another. The walls of division were high between rich and poor, men and women, Jews and Gentiles. There were even fractures forming within the Jewish and Judeo Christian community.

This was time of profound pain – brothers and sisters pulling apart from one another. People from all walks of life, losing sight of what they had in common as one human family. Certainly, the Matthean writers were asking: What do we do? How does God wish for us to bring healing and mending to these broken places?

It’s no wonder that scholars say that Matthew’s gospel - more than any other – is both a call to faith and a call to action. And the story of Transfiguration is both about witnessing Jesus the Christ transformed in all His glory and also about allowing ourselves to be transformed as a people by it.

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### ***What does it take to really “listen to God”?***

On the mountain that day, Peter, James and John are entranced by the vision of their rabbi, their teacher, their friend, Jesus being transfigured, transformed before their eyes: Jesus’s dirt stained cloak now dazzling white, his sunburned dark cheeks glow bright like the morning. His being is surrounded by those cherished prophets and teachers who have come before him – Elijah and Moses. “Listen to Him,” God says.

Just six days earlier Christ had foretold his death and resurrection to his friends and Peter had refused to believe it - saying "God forbid it, Lord." But Christ sternly reminded them that in order to follow Jesus they – *we* - must be prepared to take up our cross, to offer our lives in service to God – to put aside our own desires, even our own safety to make room for the stranger, to care for the lost, to speak out for the vulnerable, to resurrect a glimmer of hope for those we need it most.

And, now here on the mountain: Peter, James and John see Christ's words come to life.

Transfiguration: a glimmer of hope in the darkness, a glimpse of Easter morning in the wilderness, a reminder that even though we must face pain and suffering, there is still reason to believe in the joy and reconciliation to come.

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Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City as the Nazi regime continued its withering destruction across Europe - millions of Jewish civilians, along with many others (gypsies, homosexuals and people with disabilities) were being sent to gas chambers and death camps.

This was a time when many churches around the world remained complicit - adhering to the laws and decrees of their governments. And yet many other churches bravely took a stand. The Barmen Declaration, now one of our Presbyterian Confessions, is one example of this faithful resistance.

Bonhoeffer who believed that Christ calls us towards the suffering, felt moved to practice what he preached – so he left the safety of the United States to return home. He was soon arrested, and while in prison he managed to smuggle out hundreds of letters with his writings, before being hung by the Nazis two years later.

One of his letters spoke about the hope of resurrection: Resurrection is when a person is sent back to life in a wholly new way. To really be a Christian is to be like Christ – to not escape earthy tasks and difficulties, but instead to be crucified and risen with the Lord, and He with us.<sup>i</sup>

In essence, we must not charge forward to the end, but first listen to the voice who is leading us towards the pain, towards the hard places, towards the most oppressed among us - a God who is calling us to risk everything to bring transformation to an ever-aching world.

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### ***What does it mean for us to get up?***

As Jesus stands transfigured before his friends they fall to the ground shaking in fear. Jesus reaches out his hand and says, "Get up." We don't know if he says this with the gentleness of a mother's lullaby or with the sternness of a sergeant's command. Either way, we know this verb "to get up" is the same verb in Greek that is used by the angel to declare to the women on Easter

morning that Jesus is not in the tomb: “He has gone up – he is risen.”

So, here on the mountain, Jesus’s employs these same words to tell his disciples: it is time to “rise up”. They have no reason to feel small and frightened, rather to feel transformed by all that they have seen. It is time for them to bring the hope of Easter to a Lenten world.

Jesus knows this isn’t an easy request. Life is filled with things that keep us down – paralyze us in place: the cancer that keeps returning, the loss that feels too hefty to bear, the guilt of that one mistake, the pressure to succeed, the fear to fail. There are times when rising up, facing the world, feels like the hardest thing to do.

And yet it is what Jesus calls us to . . . but not alone – never alone. With a hand extended, Christ reaches out to his disciples and touches them; just as Jesus reaches out to all of us and helps us to our feet. It is God’s strength that brings us to standing and it is God’s urging that brings us to lift up one another.

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As a chaplain, Fred taught theology to sixteen inmates at *Sing Sing* Prison. One of the men, whose name was Robert, was serving fifteen years for a non-violent drug charge. The two connected almost instantly, and after Robert’s release, Fred helped him navigate the difficult path of finding a job and being a new father. The two have remained close friends throughout the years and recently sat down together.

Fred asked, “How did you survive all those years in prison?”

Robert said, “I think I survived by always having hope. What is life without hope? Even an iota of hope can go a long way. And back then in prison, Fred – you represented hope for me.”

Fred smiled, “I never knew that I had that much impact on you.”

“Yes,” said Robert, “When I came home, I was afraid; but I could call you up and ask you any question. You never told me I was dumb. I had that from you, but never from anyone else. There are times when I still get bitter and angry at my situation. I live a pretty lonely life, but you being there, and listening to me is a tremendous gift, and I feel like a lucky man.”

*Transfiguration*: to be transformed, awoken, changed; to know that no matter how chaotic the journey, Jesus helps us to our feet *again and again and again and again*, and asks that we help bring those around us to standing.

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### ***What does it take to have no fear?***

Christ’s final words to his friends on the mountaintop are: “Do not be afraid.”

And just then, all of the clouds and prophets, the cinematic special effects disappear, and only Jesus is standing there open-handed – once again in his dirt-stained cloak.

“Do not be afraid.” Words we need to hear today perhaps more than ever.

No matter the particularities of our worries, or the depths of our pain, no matter how dark and twisted the journey ahead: the answer is the same today as it was yesterday, and will be tomorrow: “Do not be afraid” for God is with us – as we are, where we are – in our brokenness, in our mourning, in our fury.

We need only open our eyes to see Christ standing before us - leading us towards the promise that transfiguration brings, empowering us to face the world with new-found strength.

One year ago today, I saw a Facebook post from a friend that for me exemplified true fearlessness.

*It read: “On the occasion of my 31<sup>st</sup> birthday, I’d like to share something deeply personal. I’ve been doing a lot of soul searching, reading, praying and counseling, and I’ve finally gotten the courage to share that I am transgender.*

*This isn’t something that I take lightly or recklessly. If you know me, you know I’m a pretty meticulous person. Basically, I have been able to piece together many experiences, like blindly putting together a puzzle, and I have figured out that my brain is more wired to identify as a woman than a man.*

*I know this probably comes as a shock to many of you, but I just don’t want to be afraid anymore. I promise it’s still me – I have the same interests, I enjoy geeky things, I still love Lord of the Rings, and Harry Potter, playing board games and rooting for my favorite teams.*

*If you are reading this and are still interested in being my friend, I want you to know that my name is now Charlotte and I use female pronouns. If you have questions I want to try to answer them and if you are concerned about getting the pronouns mixed up - don’t worry. I’m still pretty bad at getting it right myself sometimes. (thirty years - takes time to correct – even in your own brain).*

*Anyway, thanks for taking the time to read this on my birthday. I truly hope to see you in the next phase of my life.”*

Charlotte’s bold words displayed the type of courage that transfiguration brings: and her vulnerability opened the door to wider transformation.

There are so many courageous acts that no one ever sees. Countless others – in this room, and around the globe - who are enduring things that we can’t even imagine - and still getting up every day and attempting to face it with fierce grace and faithfulness. Wherever we are in that, we need not feel alone for we are emboldened every day by a God who calls us out by name, helps us to our feet, and promises not to let go.

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Jesus and his friends do not linger on the mountaintop for long.  
They make their descent, fearlessly, steadily side by side, back to the world below.  
After all, they had work to do. And so do we.  
In time there would be a trial, crucifixion, death.  
But there would also be resurrection - light in the darkness, hope just beyond the horizon.

Friends, as we begin our Lenten journey together, *Transfiguration* is a story that can serve as our precious guide, preparing us to: listen anew; get up, get out, get moving; come down and face the wilderness; uncover God-given courage.

And maybe we don't have all of tools we think we need.  
And maybe we'll fall flat on our faces a time or two. That's OK.

Christ will keep reaching out, lifting up, connecting and empowering.  
We need only trust in this sacred promise, cling tight to this saving hope,  
live into God's transformative call: Listen. Get up. Don't be Afraid.

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<sup>i</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. New York: Touchstone. 1997. p. 336-337