Rabbi, It is Good

Transfiguration (Year B) – 2/11/24

Fear can make us do strange things – and strange things can fill us with fear. If you've ever seen a stranger walking just this side of wrong down the road, or seen someone with a slightly disturbed look in their eye walk into your office or the café when you're trying to write this Sunday's sermon (!), you know how quickly this can happen. Fear, as they say, is the mind-killer, and those who fear must push through that fear until it is gone and only they remain[1], but that does require that their mind survives long enough to do it. Absent that, and the mind turns back its own lizard brain, and one's choices become: "Fight, freeze, or flee." The writer Richard Adams calls this state of mind *tharn*: being unable to move or react when in the presence of an overwhelming and imminent threat.[2] It the term he gives to the feeling a rabbit might have as a hawk hurtles toward it. In such a case, the mind often tells the body to play dead, realizing that, soon enough, they both will be.

You may think this a strange way to begin a sermon for Transfiguration Sunday. This is the day, after all, that ends the season of Epiphany – the season in which we explore the many ways "God shows up;" that's what "Epiphany" means. On this day, the glory of the Lord is revealed in revealing the Lord in all his glory. He stands on the mountain shining as brightly as the star that appeared in the East to show the wise He was here, and to show them where. (The "why" would come later.) He stands there outshining the angels of the heavenly host – the stars, to you and me. Then, the Big Boys show up: Elijah and Moses. What is there to be afraid of?

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[1] The "Litany Against Fear," from Frank Herbert, *Dune*, *passim.*
[2] See Richard Adams, *Watership Down*, *passim.*

Oh, come on, preacher, you might be thinking. Anyone seeing that lot, in that state, would be scared out of their wits. These might be good people – although, with Elijah, I'm not sure. But these might be good people, as well as great people, the very best. But they also powerful, strong, and focused. Those traits, when found together, tend to be intimidating. In simple terms, they make us tremble with awe – or fear.

So, we are told, the disciples were terrified. Not all of them, mind you. Just the three who went up there: Peter, James, and John. (Why, when these things happen, is it always those three? I'm sure they often asked themselves that very question.) They see all this shining, and they're terrified. Like the shepherds thirty years before abiding in their fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night, they were terrified. Sore afraid. Filled with fear. It sounds normal enough. It sounds rational – enough. Wouldn't you be afraid if your pastor and rabbi suddenly started glowing, and then two long-dead prophets showed up?

We fear, among other things, what we cannot control and cannot comprehend. Jesus was all that – he was both of all that. He was, as John's gospel tells us, the Word that was with God, and the Word that was God. That Word first was Light. It shone from the beginning and was the light of all people. It shone in the darkness, and the darkness could not comprehend it. The darkness could not overcome it. The darkness could not temper it or tamp it down. His light, this light was the light of the world, the light of all who dwell upon it. No-one on earth could control him, and no-one could fully understand him. "I and the Father are one," he said at one point. "The last shall be first and the first shall be last," he said at another. "In my father's house are many rooms, and I go to prepare a place for you," he said at another. "Woman, your faith has healed you," he says at a fourth. Can any of us comprehend these things? Can any of us control the one who said them? I can't imagine even trying.

Yet fear, as I said when we began, can make us do strange things. Peter starts. (Of course he does.) Mark tells us that they were terrified and did not know what to say. Peter starts talking anyway.

Word to the wise: don't do that. Nothing good comes from speaking up when staying quiet would sound better. Plus, when you're with a group looking at the sunset or sunrise, or hearing the last chord of a symphony or opera, the absolutely last thing anyone needs is for someone to ruin the moment by using words.

But Peter starts talking. "Rabbi, it is good," he says. What's good? "That we are here." Why is that good? "So that we can set up tents for you guys – one each."

Now, why would they each want a tent? Or a booth or tabernacle, which are other words for what here is called a tent. Something to keep them in, or shade them from the sun, maybe spend the night and get up tomorrow to talk about whatever it is they're up here speaking and shining about. Commentators generally try to be generous with Peter, who may not have realized as he started speaking that he really had nothing to say. He would find out soon enough. The Geneva Bible translators (1560) give this note: "Peter measured this vision according to his own capacity, not considering the end thereof." That is, Peter let his limitations define his reality, and refused to consider expanding his understanding or broadening his mind. The Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ was revealed to him in all his glory, and all Peter could think to do about it was put a lid on it. Or a tent, a booth, or tabernacle. He could not stop and ask himself, "Now, why is this happening? Why am I here to see it?" Instead, he jumped to conclusions, assumed he knew what to do, and started trying to do it. He didn't ask, "Rabbi, shall we set up tents for you?" or even, "Rabbi, what's happening? What should we do next?" He didn't ask anything. He just started talking, assuming he knew what he was talking about.

He did not.

It took the voice of God Almighty to shut him up and make him realize that. "This is my Son, my Beloved. Listen to him." God's lesson. God's Word. Listen to him.

What's the first thing this Son of God tells them to do? "Don't say anything about this. Keep your mouths shut about who I am, Don't tell people until the opportune moment, when my work is done and also when they might actually believe you."

It wasn't the last time in Peter's life that a vision would come down to him from heaven and still have to be explained to him. Remember the banquet that descends to Peter in a dream on a big sheet in the Book of Acts to show him that the food restrictions and other time-bound horrors of Mosaic law were now *passé*? He didn't get it then, either, not until an angel piped up and said, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." All food is good, now – provided it's not independently lethal. Don't be afraid to try a new thing, or to see things differently. Don't be afraid of anything at all.

That also is something Jesus says. Quite often, in fact: "Do not be afraid." He also says its corollary: "Peace be with you." He wants us to live without fear or anxiety, and with peace and harmony. He wants us to be free of suspicion and envy, and filled rather with compassion and pity. Filled with compassion and pity until they shine forth from us with as much of the glory of the Lord as we can handle. Such glory shines mostly clearly when we teach, seek to learn, and show mercy.

Howard Thurman, the author of our second reading this morning, understood that quite well. In *Disciplines of the Spirit,* he reminds us that "To Jesus, God breathed through all that is." It takes God-like levels of wonder and pity to do that, to comprehend how God breathes through lilies and madmen and legionnaires. It takes Howard Thurman-like levels of theological understanding and writing skill to express

it with such power and grace. It is well to bring him to mind this morning, this month, and at any time. One might say, "Rabbi, it is good" to do so.[3]

For some you, he needs no introduction. One of the most prominent voices of the Civil Rights Era, and a mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., Howard Thurman was "Director of Religious Life at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges," "Professor of Christian Theology and Dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University," and then "Professor of Spiritual Resources and Dean of March Chapel at Boston University." He was the first African American to hold such a position at any largely white educational institution in the U.S., and it was there that he got to know and mentor Dr. King.

But that's not all. As his bio at The Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground at Boston University reminds us, "In 1944, Thurman cofounded the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco—an interracial congregation intentionally designed to break through the barriers that separated people on the basis of race, color, creed, or national origin." We would add to that list other barriers in need of being broken down – those of gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation not least – but intentionally break them down he did, and helped others learn how to do so and why. If Jesus understood that God breathed through all that is, those who follow him can do no less.

To sum up: Fear may make us do strange things, but love teaches to do good things. The right things – things that are pleasing in the sight of the Lord. If we always treat one another as those through whom God has breathed, who are made in God's image and bound by God to love each other as ourselves, we will find that it is, indeed, good, Rabbi that we are here. *Amen.*

[3] Info re: Howard Thurman is taken from: https://www.bu.edu/thurman/about-us/who-is-howard-thurman/.