

† **READING FROM THE GOSPELS: MATTHEW 17:1-9**

The Touch of God

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I'm thinking we need to put some warning signs on the doors of the church . . . we need to alert people of the dangers that might face them when they come into our sanctuary. I'm serious . . . after all, do you really know what you are doing here this morning and what might happen to you? Oh, sure . . . it's Sunday and you're in church. But do you really know why you've come here this morning . . . and, more importantly, what is expected of you?

I doubt that any of us were overly concerned about what might happen this morning . . . think about it . . . you got up . . . dressed . . . and came to church. It happens all the time. For some of you it's part of your weekly routine. A regular part of your life. You probably had a chance to catch up with some friends . . . maybe drink a cup of coffee . . . some of you might have been lucky enough to have even snagged a donut. Now you've found your pew . . . and for the next hour . . . well, you know . . . it's always about the same. Now I'm not saying that we take God for granted . . . but I do believe we all have lost some of the awe and majesty for our Lord that should fill us when we come into this church to worship God Almighty . . . the creator of the whole universe. Think about it . . . there's always plenty of pomp and circumstance for our president . . . or for the Queen of England . . . or for rock stars and movie stars . . . you can see the look in people's eyes when they're in the same room with famous people . . . a sense of wonderment and even reverence. But here . . . now . . . in the presence of God . . . do we feel the same way? And did you know it could even be dangerous to be here?

The same could be said about three disciples who walked up a mountain with Jesus . . . three disciples who had grown accustomed to hearing their rabbi teach week after week . . . even witnessing some miracles . . . it had all become quite normal to them . . . I suspect, like us, they had begun to take Jesus for granted. It was just another day with Jesus . . . that is . . . until they reached the top of the mountain.

Listen with your hearts to the Word of the Lord . . . from the 17th chapter of Matthew, verses 1-9. There's absolutely no doubt that Peter, James and John didn't have a clue what Jesus was up to when they headed up that mountain. But I suspect that they were excited, because they, out of the 12, were picked to go. They were obviously part of Jesus' inner circle . . . the select . . . the best of the disciples. "When Jesus has a special mission . . . he always picks us!" So off they go on a climb . . . higher and higher . . . until they finally reach the top. That's when they find out that it can be dangerous following Jesus. Because when they spot Moses and Elijah standing there with their teacher . . . and hear that booming voice of God coming out of a cloud . . . they are literally knocked off their feet . . . scared to death. "Weren't we just going up here to pray and eat our sandwiches?"

Sometimes following Jesus can be dangerous . . . even in the midst of our worship. You never know who might show up and what you might hear . . . maybe even God telling you to do something. You might get knocked off your feet. It might literally fill you with fear when God begins prodding you to head off in a new direction. That's when I want to shout out . . . "Quick . . . duck under the pew!"

In her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard lays it out on the line for us . . . "Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? . . . Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we (carelessly) invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are

children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return." —Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*, pp. 40-41.

Powerful and challenging words . . . but they are true. The God we worship is not some ordinary idol that we can just take out of our pocket or hang on our rear view mirror or make empty promises to when things are going bad in our lives. The God we worship is very much alive and very active in our lives and in the lives of all people in this world. And when you least expect it, the God we worship will take you to the top of a mountain . . .and there . . . in a moment of glory and majesty . . . remind you of who you are and whose you are and what it means to truly follow Jesus Christ. And at the moment . . . you will probably fall on the ground in as much fear as those disciples did. Because when we claim to be a disciple of Jesus Christ . . . Christ is going to do something to you . . . Christ is going to take your life and use it in a powerful way in the making of the Kingdom of God. Now you can sit there and make all kinds of claims about your life . . . how busy you are . . . "I don't have time to go mountain climbing . . . I have way too many responsibilities . . . I've got all sorts of demands from my family and my work and then there are all those other commitments I have to friends and organizations and clubs and even political parties. I'm lucky enough just to get to church by 11 a.m. on a Sunday!"

And I, as your pastor, am the first one to tell you . . . "Don't worry about it. I know you're busy. Just work the church in when you can. There's no pressure." And because of that . . . I've failed you. As your pastor, I often say, "It's okay if you don't have time for the church. Just put it on the back burner until your life gets a little easier and then you might be able to squeeze something in later." What I should be saying is that it's time to turn up the gas on the front burner and put Jesus Christ first in your life. But frankly, that's always been hard for me to do. However . . . when we claim we are a disciple . . . that's precisely what we should do. Those disciples up on the mountaintop with Jesus had no idea what they were getting into . . . they had no idea who Jesus truly was . . . that is, until the moment of transfiguration . . . then the idea of following God almost scared them to death . . . and it should have. . . because Jesus never soft peddles what it means to follow him . . . we're the ones who water down his message to fit our schedules.

Now . . . before you decide to get up and run out of the sanctuary . . . I've got some good news in all of this. So please listen . . . this is important . . . When the disciples were filled with absolute fear . . . Jesus touched them. He didn't scold them or tease them for trembling in fear on the ground . . . no . . . he had compassion and love for them at that moment. He knew what was in their hearts . . . he knew that they didn't believe they could do what was being asked of them . . . he knew their weaknesses and their excuses . . . and he just touched them, filling them with a sense of peace and hope and grace that brought them back up on their feet . . . that gave them the courage to walk back down that mountain with him to face whatever the world would soon throw at them. And in those moments . . . when you are filled with fear and anxiety that prevents you from being the disciple God has called you to be . . . Christ will reach out and touch you, too . . . filling you with sufficient grace to walk back down the mountain with him. And remember this, too . . . there is absolutely nothing that God is going to ask of you that you cannot accomplish . . . with God's help. As Paul tells us in his letter to the Ephesians . . . "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." (Eph. 2:10) We can't measure what God calls us to do by the world's standards . . . there is nothing that God will ask you to do that is any more important or any less important than

what is asked of someone else. . . . because giving a thirsty person a cup of water is just as important in the eyes of God as someone who gives a billion dollars to fight poverty. Maybe you have the gift of encouragement and you can visit or write notes to people who are neglected or alone . . . maybe you have the gift of teaching and you can share your gift in the classroom or through mentoring or even at work or home . . . maybe you have the gift of helping others and you share your talents in a homeless shelter or with your neighbors down the street . . . maybe you have the gift of administration or visioning and you can see wonderful possibilities of what God has in store for this community of faith . . . maybe you have the gift of evangelism because you are able to share your story of how Christ has changed your life . . . maybe you have the wonderful gift of hospitality and you can make anyone feel at home . . . or maybe you have the gift of mercy and can reach out to those who are hurting or grieving . . . providing a safe place for people to share the burdens and pains of their hearts . . . The truth is . . . you have been called by God . . . we worship a powerful and awesome God who created not just a great wide universe . . .but who created you and me . . . and there are billions of us out there . . . and our God has a purpose for each and every one of us in the building of God's Kingdom. And when you are transfigured with our Lord up on a mountaintop . . . when you finally begin to finally realize who this is that you are worshipping and not just take the Lord for granted . . . it will shake you and fill you with fear . . . but just like those disciples, God won't leave you shaking on the ground. God will touch your life and you will do amazing things through the power of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

As we prepare to enter the season of Lent this week . . . my prayer is that you will put on your life jacket and your crash helmet ... to take the time to walk up the mountain with Jesus Christ . . . to be willing to sit and be still in the presence of our Lord . . . to even tremble in your shoes at his mighty presence . . . AND as you step out in obedience, EXPECT to feel his touch, just as he touched the disciples on the mountain . . . as you begin your walk with Jesus . . . one step at a time . . . becoming the disciple you were called to be . . .not because I say so . . . but because Jesus Christ has touched your life . . . and has filled you with strength and courage and grace and hope . . . to do whatever it is you are being called to do.

Shackled by a heavy burden,
'Neath a load of guilt and shame;
Then the hand of Jesus touched me,
And now I am no longer the same.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.