

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

Bread, Bath & Beyond

February 11, 2018

Title: Beyond the Fear

Scripture: 2 Kings 2:1-12

Mark 9:2-9

In the movie The Wizard of Oz there is a scene where Dorothy, her dog Toto, the Scarecrow, Lion, and Tin Man come to see the Great Wizard of Oz for the second time. The first time they saw him, they were terrified of the smoke, fire, very large green talking head, and the bellowing voice that came out of it. The Wizard refused to help them until they brought him the broom from the Wicked Witch of the West.

When they came back with their mission accomplished, and after facing many frightening things, they were still afraid of the Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz, but not quite as much as earlier. When he told them to come back the next day, Dorothy protested.

Toto, doing what little dogs often do best, went exploring and pulled aside the curtain that hid an older smaller man speaking into a microphone and creating all the terrifying signs of the great wizard. When he saw that Dorothy and the others had seen him, he tried to maintain the façade by bellowing, “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.” By now, unafraid, Dorothy and her companions spoke up and became their own best advocates.

Today’s Gospel reading is almost an exact opposite of this story – with one exception. The disciples, Peter, James, and John, who had left their boats to follow Jesus, willingly went up the mountain with Jesus. They had come to know him, and they trusted him. They knew that there was something very different about Jesus and they were really beginning to learn about what they had signed onto when they decided to follow Jesus.

It wasn't until they were up on the mountain that things started to get a little scary. As Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us, Jesus was suddenly transfigured before them; his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And then like the smoke and fire of the Great Wizard of Oz, things became a little more amazing. Suddenly Elijah and Moses appeared on the mountain top – talking with Jesus.

Mark tells us that Peter did not know what to say when this happened because they were terrified. However, Peter who was always the impetuous one, always the one to try to take charge, did speak; he tried to take charge; he needed to do something.

When we find ourselves afraid what do we do? We are familiar with the idea of “fight or flight”. Sometimes we react to something fearful by running away, either literally or metaphorically by making excuses, blaming someone else, or doing something else to protect ourselves. Sometimes we react to fear by fighting – being determined to beat that cancer, attack the danger to save ourselves or someone else, putting up a fight in whatever way we can.

Peter reacted by trying to do something. “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He may have been trying to prolong the event – and provide a place for them to stay. He may have simply been being hospitable – trying to take care of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Some commentators speculate that this occurred during or near the Feast of Booths or Sukkot.

This was one of three feasts that all native born Jewish men were required to participate in. It followed the harvest, and Jewish men would travel to Jerusalem and bring their tithes and offerings, the best of their crops, to the temple. The festival was instituted after God had delivered

Israel from bondage in Egypt and reminded Israelites in every generation of their deliverance by God. It also looked forward to the coming Messiah.

Now, remember that there were no cameras at this time, but Peter, James and John recognized that it was Moses and Elijah on the mountain speaking to Jesus – important men of their faith but who had long been dead – and yet Peter and his companions knew who they were. On the mountain we have Moses who had led his people out of Egypt and through the wilderness. Moses, who had received the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai. With Moses was Elijah – one of the great prophets of Jewish history. Elijah was the one we heard about in the reading from 2 Kings today – the one who did not die but was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind when a chariot of fire and horses separated Elijah and his protégé Elisha.

The last verses in the Old Testament – the prophet Malachi – ends with the words, “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. See I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers...”ⁱ

Jewish people expected the prophet Elijah to herald the arrival of the Messiah. In the New Testament, you will also find the supposition that John the Baptist was Elijah heralding the arrival of Jesus the Messiah. So, what was happening on the mountaintop was beyond amazing. Moses and Elijah, the Law and the prophets, together with Jesus – who must be the Messiah.

And then to push things over the top – a cloud overshadowed them and a voice from the cloud spoke, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to

him!” A voice from the cloud had spoken once before – when Jesus was baptized by John, identifying Jesus as, “My Son, My Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”. Now comes the additional command – “Listen to him!”

The three steady fishermen who had gone up the mountain with Jesus, had participated in something beyond any imagining. They had seen the impossible. They had seen the glory of God in incredible ways.

When the curtain was moved away, Dorothy and her companions, learned that there was absolutely nothing to be afraid of, that it was all smoke and mirrors. What had been terrifying and unknown became much ado about nothing when the reality was revealed. On the mountain, what began as maybe a little bit out of the ordinary, but nothing to be terribly concerned about became incredible and frightening when the reality was revealed. Jesus was not just a great teacher with some powers of healing – He was the Son of God and Peter, James, and John were present at this revelation. Suddenly, they looked around and Moses and Elijah were gone; they were alone again with Jesus.

You’d think that the first thing they would want to do would be to tell everyone what they saw – but as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after he had been raised from the dead. Imagine how difficult that must have been for them.

What did they take from the mountaintop to sustain them for the journey? I’m sure that they were affected by this, but it didn’t make them into superheroes in their faith. Later in Jesus’ ministry, James and John still came to Jesus and asked Jesus to let them sit on his right and left hand in his glory, or when he came into power as the Messiah. (Mark 10:35-37). Peter would later deny three times that he even knew who Jesus was.

Despite being present at this incredible moment, they still did not really understand. This gives me hope. It reminds me that it's okay for us to be puzzled. It's okay for us to make mistakes. It's okay for us to be afraid but we are still to do as God, the voice from the cloud told Peter, James and John, "Listen to him."

As we learn to listen to Jesus, even if we get scared and say the wrong thing, even if we get frightened and run away, as we listen to Jesus, we may find the glory creeping up on us without us even being aware. When we learn to listen, we find ourselves being strengthened, just as the disciples were, for the road ahead.ⁱⁱ

For several weeks we have been talking about going beyond the things that limit us in our lives and in our response to God. We talked about communion and baptism (bread and bath) that are basic to our faith. We have been invited to go beyond our beliefs, beyond the assumptions that we have held and to be open to the unexpected. We have been challenged to go beyond our horizons, beyond what we can see for ourselves and be open to new possibilities. We have been urged to go beyond the boundaries that we set or that others try to set for us that limit our ability to love and to grow.

We have seen how Jesus went beyond the chaos of life – and how we can also do so, by being quiet, by stepping aside and spending time in quiet with God. Today we are invited to bring them all together and to go beyond the fear of whatever it is that may be holding us back from the possibilities that God has for us.

We, like Peter, James and John, often find ourselves terrified when faced with Christ standing before us calling us into whatever mission field God has in mind for us. We may find ourselves feeling like everything has

been turned upside down and we find ourselves challenged to move beyond where we have been very comfortable.

When we are able or willing to do this, we can experience a positive outcome – we can end up in a new life-giving place. We can avoid some of the paralysis that can come with fear if we start to focus not on why we are afraid, or why something happened but rather to ask “what”. We can ask ourselves, “What can I learn from this? What can I do differently going forward because of this experience?” I read this week, something that I hope to remember. Questions that ask “what” give us energy, they motivate us. Questions that ask “why” only steal that energy and motivation away.ⁱⁱⁱ When we continue to ask “why” we become paralyzed. When we ask “What” – what’s next, what should I do, what can I learn, - we are asking questions that produce action and help us move beyond the fear.

We may never have a mountaintop experience like Peter, James and John had, but we can still experience the very real presence of Christ with us if we are able to look around us. If we are able to move beyond our beliefs, horizons, boundaries, and chaos, we may be able to see Christ in the many common everyday things around us.

I was reminded this week, of something that happened about 8 years ago. I had taken my young granddaughter with me to visit my mother. We spent a short time with my mother who wasn’t very communicative that day. However, it took almost two hours to get to the car. We stopped at a swing under the overhang at the Elder Care Facility. The overhang there creates a bit of a wind tunnel and there was a gentle breeze blowing. As we sat on the swing, and felt the breeze, my granddaughter as only a not quite two-year-old could was enthralled. In delight, she kept shouting,

“Whee!” When the swing slowed, she said, “gain, Nana, ‘gain”. Once I got past my thoughts about all the things that I thought we should be doing, I was able to see Christ present in the delight of a young child, experiencing a gentle breeze, the joy of a swing, and being with her Nana. Even 8 years later, that is a precious memory for me of seeing Christ in the everyday – and allowing myself to see the amazement in the everyday.

I’m not always very good at that, but instead of asking “why” I don’t, I could ask “what” God wants me to see each day, or in each conversation. When we go beyond our beliefs, our horizon, our boundaries, the chaos and our fear, we can find the extraordinary things that we can do when we are open to God’s call in our everyday lives. We can discover the extraordinary things we can do if we can move beyond our fear, beyond ourselves to be all that God calls us to be and do.

Neil Diamond, Carole Bayer Sager and Burt Bacharach inspired by the 1982 film E.T. wrote a song called “Heartlight” that invites us to:

Turn on your heartlight
Let it shine wherever you go
Let it make a happy glow
For all the world to see.

Let us “turn on our heartlight” for all the world to see what happens when we are open to God in our every single day life.

ⁱ Malachi 4:4-6a

ⁱⁱ [Mark for Everyone](#) Commentary on Mark 9:2-9

ⁱⁱⁱ [Upper Room Disciplines](#), Feb 10, 2018, p.59