

“Rise Up Anew”

Lamentations 3:21-23; Matthew 17:1-9 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – February 19, 2023

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might see your glory and listen to your Beloved Son, telling us not to fear. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The world is a lot lately. My apologies if you're the kind of person who's had to tune out the news for your own sanity, but just to set the scene broadly – the continued devastation of the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, where the death toll has now surpassed any comprehensible number; the upcoming one-year anniversary of the beginning of the brutal invasion of Ukraine; the epidemic of gun violence in our nation, which has sadly become so commonplace it's ceased being front-page news; the ongoing crisis of police brutality to black and brown siblings; and of course, the nearer-to-hand challenges of life and church in 2023, when post-pandemic exhaustion, fragility and uncertainty, grief and health challenges seem to break upon us in never-ending waves – it's a lot. What can it possibly mean to read the story of Jesus transfigured in dazzling glory in such a context? #MustBeNice.

This is why I'm so grateful that we're in Lectionary Year A, when our primary gospel is Matthew's, because there's a line in his version of this story that doesn't show up in the other two. And I think it offers us a way into this story that could be really helpful in our current state of overwhelm. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have the basics of story in common: Jesus goes up the mountain with Peter, James, and John. He's

transfigured, so that he's almost too dazzling to look at. Moses and Elijah appear, and apparently, the three of them are having a conversation, though it's not reported what is said, nor are we given the impression that there was much time for anything of substance to be discussed. Then Peter gets all awkward and blurts out his suggestion for some booths for the three of them, which is, of course, nonsense. And then there is a cloud, and a voice from the cloud which declares "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!" And all three of these gospels make clear that Peter and James and John are freaked out. Mark and Luke use the word "terrified," in fact. But Matthew puts it differently. "They fell to the ground," he writes, "and were overcome by fear." And then Matthew adds in another detail the other two don't have: "But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

In our present situation, this moment makes me think of another verse from Matthew, chapter 5, verse 11: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" If this moment between Jesus and his three closest disciples is how he approaches us, encourages and revives us when we're terrified simply of his dazzling glory, how much more will he tenderly reassure us when we're terrified because the world is crumbling apart and we barely have the energy to pull together a potluck? "Get up," he says, "and do not be afraid." But not just a command, because it's accompanied by that gentle touch on the shoulder, the kind that courses a rush of strength and hope into our bodies and souls.

The liturgical calendar schedules the story of the Transfiguration the Sunday before Lent begins every year, seemingly as a way to fuel Jesus up with encouragement and confidence before casting him out into the wilderness to face temptation for 40 days. And in some years, it seems that this dazzling display of glory is intended to fuel us up too. But sometimes, it's important to notice other parts of the story. That cloud, described always as "overshadowing" the disciples, but also in Matthew as a "bright" cloud, which doesn't make much sense at first, until you remember how necessary your sunglasses are on a certain kind of overcast day. But more so than the cloud, which did seem like it might be the source of the terror, is the voice. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" "Listen to him!" In some ways, that is, of course, exactly what the disciples have been doing for months now. But something about the dazzling-ness of it all and the presence of Moses and Elijah, must have made it clear that "listening" to Jesus was going to move to a whole other level soon.

Just six days earlier, Jesus had been trying to explain his impending suffering and death to the disciples, and even a little bit of the implications of that for those who wanted to follow him. Let's just say it was not a moment when the disciples had "ears to hear." Remember that moment when Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan!" to Peter? That is just a few verses before this story in Matthew, and he says it because of Peter's reaction to Jesus foretelling his crucifixion. So when the voice from the cloud says, "Listen to him!" it may have been those words that were ringing in their ears. Is it any wonder they were overcome by fear?

“But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” Can you imagine that happening to you? With the weight of all that is knocking our hearts down to the ground, can you imagine Jesus gently resting his hand on your shoulder and saying, “Get up and do not be afraid”? Can you listen to that kind of encouragement? Can you listen to it in the way of listening that leads to following? The passage from Lamentations tells us that God’s mercies “rise up anew each morning.” What if we are, in fact, God’s mercies? What if, in fact, in the face of the devastation the world is facing, the sorrow and exhaustion and turmoil, it is us that are being touched and told to rise up and not be afraid? And those are two moments, aren’t they? There is the touch – the moment of communion with God in Christ that revives and heals and strengthens. And then there is the call – the moment of assurance that enables us to stand tall and offer God’s mercy in ways we couldn’t have imagined before.

It seems daring, at first, bordering disrespectful, for our friends at Week of Compassion to offer us a theme inviting us to “Rise Up Anew.” How can they project such strength and hope in the face of all they deal with every day? How can they take these scenes of devastation – entire communities ravaged by war, children playing in ruins – and add in colorful animations of flowers growing? I haven’t taken the opportunity to ask them directly, but given everything I’ve learned from the leaders of this ministry over the years, my guess is that they would use one word in particular if we challenge them on this. That word is “partnership.” Week of Compassion is not just viewing these tragedies from afar, as most of us are. They are working with the people

on the ground all over the world, our partners, who help us respond effectively and efficiently.

Week of Compassion isn't just sending money. Our people are showing up, doing the hard work of maintaining partnerships across cultural and language barriers, and sometimes even religious barriers. And when they come back to us and say "Rise Up Anew," it's because their own faith has been revived by the faith of our partners on the ground, the people living their lives in the midst of lamentation. I have no doubt that those colorful flowers drawn on top of the videos of crumbling buildings and refugee camps are a direct symbolic representation of the testimonies of faith and hope that our friends at Week of Compassion witness when they visit. Who are we not to heed this call to Rise Up Anew? Who are we to ignore Jesus' gentle touch on our shoulders? Who are we to stop up our ears against his invitation to "get up and do not be afraid"? Who are we to reject our identity as the mercies God is renewing each morning?

The world is a lot these days. Our lives and our hearts are overwhelmed. But God is bigger than all of it. God's mercies are welling up inside of us right now, bursting to be shared. Jesus' gentle hand is reaching for our shoulders, where we lay knocked to the ground by sorrow and stress. He's calling to us to get up. He's telling us not to fear. Our eyes may be blinded by dazzling glory or by tears, but the voice from the cloud is clear: "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!" May we listen; may we follow; may we be renewed and strengthened for whatever comes. Hallelujah and Amen.

