



Transfiguration Sunday
February 22, 2004

Matthew 17:1-8
Fearing Love
M. Craig Barnes

Peter had big dreams for Jesus. A week before our text begins, Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" It was Peter who knew that the right answer was, "You are the Christ. The Son of the Living God." But he was thinking, "Jesus, you are the miracle man. You are the one who can make dreams come true."

Moments later when Jesus began to talk about going to a cross, and suffering greatly and being killed, Peter said, "God forbid. This will never happen to you." Peter was a "can do" kind of guy who believed the point of having a Savior was to avoid things like a cross. But the Lord said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan. You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Of all the disciples, it is easiest for me to relate to Peter. He has committed himself to following Jesus. When called upon, he can usually come up with the right answer. And most importantly, he loves Jesus. But he doesn't always understand him. So when Jesus then invites Peter to come with him and spend time on a mountain, it was a very confused and disillusioned disciple that followed. That is the portrait of most followers of Jesus - confused about where Jesus is leading us, and disappointed that his dreams are not our dreams.

How many times have we looked at a desperate situation, where the need for Jesus to make a dream come true was so obvious? There is violence in the Middle East. Young mothers and their children are sleeping in cars in our city. Our soldiers are being killed in Iraq. Seeing this we cannot help but ask, "So God, why don't you make this world a better place?" And what about in your life? What dream have you cherished that God just won't rescue?

If you love our Lord, if you have followed him as Peter, then sooner or later you're going to have a lover's quarrel with Jesus. That's not just because he won't give you what you want, but because Jesus won't do what you are sure he wants to do. That's the dilemma. We expect that we won't get everything we want for ourselves, but it drives us crazy when Jesus won't come through on his own agendas of peace, justice, and healing the broken. Why does he insist on heading for the cross? When you find yourself in that confusion, like Peter, you are ready to climb God's mountain.

In the Bible the mountains serve as unique ground for the divine-human encounter. It was upon Mt. Sinai that Moses stood before God, and upon Mt. Horeb that Elijah heard God's still small voice. Now it is upon another high mountain, that Jesus takes Peter along with James and John (two other disciples who have big dreams). If you have ever stood on the top of a high mountain, you know exactly why God chooses such a setting for these encounters. The tops of

high peaks are barren, intimidating places. People don't belong there. There is nothing to protect you: no trees or shelters, just a lot of wind. If the weather changes, you are so exposed that you could die on the spot. To stand in that place is to place ourselves in the hands of forces and power that we cannot control, that are too great for us resist.

That is the exact feeling you should have in worship. This isn't about making you comfortable. It is about standing before God as a people who have risen above the illusion of being in control, or of even knowing how to dream.

Mircea Eliade, the late historian of religion, used to speak about a legend that was told in the mountains of Nepal. According to the legend, in the cool air of the mountain top, a wax god sat in solitary splendor. It was the shrine of the village that sat in the valley below. After generations of worshipers climbed their way to the top of the mountain, there came a time when some decided to bring the god down from his chilly citadel and establish him in the center of their marketplace. He was convenient then, and worship was not such a bother. But in the warm sun of the valley, the wax god softened and sagged. The villagers discovered that this allowed them to make a few changes in their god. Those who thought his countenance too severe molded a delightful smile on his face. Soon the god looked just as approving as they wanted him to look. In the heat, he continued to sag, and so the villagers began to take away the wax to give light to their homes. Until all of the wax, and all of the god was gone.

When we mold God in our own image, using him only to fill our needs, we soon find that we have no God at all. True worship does not drag God down to us. Rather it takes us up to the fearful encounter with God. That is what all the music, prayers, and liturgy of worship are designed to do - to lead you up to frightening new terrain.

Once Jesus gets Peter up to the top of the mountain, and quietens Peter's bright ideas and his dark discouragement, Jesus is then transfigured into a more glorious figure than Peter could have ever imagined. "His face shone like the sun. His garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared Moses and Elijah talking to him." Notice, though, that this isn't the frightening part for Peter. He was ready and waiting for that scene. This was big. This was the biggest Jesus yet. This is the Jesus Peter had been hoping for. He is bright and shiny, hanging out with Moses and Elijah. Without missing a beat, Peter quickly suggests a building program so they can stay right there and capture the glory.

As Peter is announcing his plans to build the three booths, suddenly the voice of God interrupts him, saying, "This is my Son the beloved... listen to him!" Listen to a voice calling you to a new understanding of salvation. Listen to the beloved. In hearing this Word of God, it is then that the disciples become afraid, and they fall on their faces. Jesus who is aglow, Jesus the dream maker doesn't frighten them a bit. But hearing the voice of heaven that forces us to listen to a Son who has been saying he is heading to the cross drives us crazy with fear. That's because if we follow Jesus to the cross, that is where our dreams will go as well.

This church is blessed to have a beautiful mosaic of Jesus' transfiguration hovering above our worship services. You cannot look at it without also seeing the cross and communion table.

It is a weekly reminder that worship lifts us to encounter a Savior who cannot be captured by our expectations.

You see, it is you and me on our faces here. If we have really heard the unpredictable Word of God that interrupts our cherished dreams, what can we do but fall on our faces, fearfully trembling at the thought of giving up those time honored hopes that have gotten us through for so long?

But you haven't left worship yet. For as we tremble at the thought of hearing the truth, it is at that point that Jesus comes, and as he did to the disciples, he touches us, saying, "Rise and have no fear." Rise from the places of grief and despair. Rise from the collapse of old dreams that will not come true. Rise to discover the new dream that like Jesus, you too are the beloved of God.

Some preachers warn you about the judgment of God, but that is not the reason you should fear God. The real reason is because God loves you. This is no ordinary lover. This one is going to be hard to control. Ask anyone who has been in love. Love is impossible to control. It leads you to places you never intended on going, it reorients your life, and gives you new dreams that are based not in what you want but in what the Lover wants.

"And when they lifted up their eyes they saw no one but Jesus only." That's an incredible line of Scripture. They didn't see Moses or Elijah, any of the old hopes, or even their fears. They only saw Jesus. And they were now able to love him because they saw him for who he really was, transfigured from being the dream maker to being the beloved. That is what worship must always leave us with - a clearer vision of the Savior we love.

We come back here week after week because down in the valley where life is lived, we all face a world that tries to distract us with other dreams. In worship we learn how to listen to Jesus, and see only him. When we leave worship, we see Jesus in our relationships and in our work. We see him in the homeless and the hungry. We see him even in the cross where he sometimes leads.

Seeing Jesus, we too are transfigured into being the beloved. And that has always been God's dream for you.

O Jesus, the Christ, Son of the Living God, we have committed our lives to following, but your ways are not our ways. We need not know your direction, but we do need a clear vision of You. Amen.