



The Westminster Pulpit

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church
3900 West End Avenue Nashville, Tennessee 37205-1899

“Get up and do not be afraid!” **Sermon on Matthew 17:1-13**

Donovan A. Drake

Transfiguration of the Lord
February 19, 2023

In Matthew's Gospel, mountaintops are thin spaces between heaven and earth. Mathew's Gospel begins with the Sermon on the Mountain, where Jesus blesses and instructs his followers on how to be the light of the world.

Matthew's Gospel will end on a mountaintop, and there Jesus, through his death and resurrection, has been given all authority on heaven and earth, tells his doubting disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”

But there is a mountain in the middle of the gospel, and that is where we are today.

Matthew 17:1-13

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” ¹⁰And the disciples asked him, “Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” ¹¹He replied, “Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things, ¹²but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also, the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.” ¹³Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

“Get up and do not be afraid.” “Get up and do not be afraid.” The ability to follow those instructions depends a great deal on their context.

For example, this past week I was on a mountain with Cullen Douglass. Same mountain but really can't say that I was with him. You see, we were skiing, and I've decided it is not in my best interest to ski with him. For Cullen has a way of leading his followers into the valley of the shadow of death.

“Trust me!” I won't. Every year, someone who goes skiing with Cullen gets injured. Cullen laughs it off by saying, “Hey, one more trip to the ER and I get a free bean burrito.” Cullen has an odd sense of humor.

“Come on,” he says, “Get up! Don't be afraid! Where's your faith?” “In God, Cullen. In God.”

I know, I know, the Bible says, a thousand times over, “Do not be afraid.” But there is a verse or two in Proverbs that instructs, “Don't be stupid.” After all, God gave us fear so we won't be stupid.

Fear is what keeps my skiing from going viral on the internet. And it keeps you from having to answer the question, “So that's your pastor hitting a tree with his face?”

Fear is God's gift. Fear makes you take cover in a safe place instead of live-streaming the tornado hitting your neighbor's house, your neighbor's shed, your neighbor's swing set, your shared fence, your swing set, your shed, your... and that's when the video cuts off. But on the bright side, the video did receive 1,000 caring hearts on Facebook.

I know, I know, the Bible's most often repeated phrase is, “Do not be afraid.” I know. But please don't forget, God created fear! God uses fear. God uses fear as a motivator right from the beginning. You remember. God sternly commended Adam and Eve, “You may eat of every tree in the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat. You eat it, you will die. You got that?” God uses fear to keep us on the straight and narrow.

Jesus closes his sermon on the mount with a little fear. Those who hear my words and do not act on them will be like the foolish one who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew, and great was the fall. Fear...

“And the rich man in hell cried out, But father Abraham, send Lazarus to warn my brothers so that they do not enter into this torment.” And Father Abraham said, “They have Moses and the prophets. They just need to listen to them.” Fear is a great motivator – God knows.

So, if you want to say that line - “You do know that ‘Do not be afraid’ is the most repeated phrase in the Bible.” - can I ask you not to say it, right before you go down the double black diamond? Don't say it before you go out on thin ice. Don't say it when the science says otherwise.

Say it! Say it when God is giving you the call to be about God's work. Say it when you are called to stand up for the least of these. Say it when you are to love the unlovable. Say it when you are called on to show mercy. Say it when you're called to empty your pockets for the one in need.

Hear it! When you're on the mountaintop. The voice of God has rattled the heavens and the earth, "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased! Listen to him."

"Get up and do not be afraid" for you are indeed on a triple black diamond heading down the mountain and onto the road that leads to Jerusalem and the cross. Listen to him. Listen to him when he says, "Get up and do not be afraid."

I was thinking about Nedson Zulu the other day. He was our missionary in Tête province of Mozambique until his sudden death. I keep a photograph of him near my computer as a reminder to not be afraid of the gospel. To be bold. Hearing and heading the call over and over to "Get up and do not be afraid." Many of you know the story of when Nedson was leading a group of Americans into the province, and someone in the group took a picture with their camera of a policeman.

Let me tell you, you don't want to do that. Put that one in your fear file. Well, the policeman got incredibly angry and snatched the camera away. I would have said, "There goes the camera. Lesson learned." Nedson went over and spoke to the man with the camera and the gun for quite a while, then came back with the camera. I don't know how much the camera cost. Maybe \$700. Whew! The camera was saved.

And while saving a camera is a nice story, what makes me remember the story is that on Sunday in the worship service, there was someone visiting for the first time. It was the policeman. It's not about saving cameras. It's about saving souls.

Jesus touched him. Get up and do not be afraid. "Why are you so angry my friend? Why are you so angry when God is doing something good? Oh, you don't know what God is doing? Come, my friend. You need to let go of the things that are killing you. You need to let go of the bitterness. Come, my friend, you need to see all that is good."

Nedson touched the policeman's life with light and power. "Get up and do not be afraid." You get the picture. Here's the picture: if you're 60 years old, it may be wise to fear the black diamond in Colorado.

Whether you're 60 years old, six years old, or 600 years old, when Jesus touches you to see the need, "Get up and do not be afraid", to go down the mountain moving ever closer to the cross....

"What do you need my friend?" "Do you know what God is doing, my friend?" "Let me help you up and do not be afraid."