

“Seeds of Courage”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Matthew 17:1-9  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
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You’ve likely heard the phrase, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” I imagine if Jesus were to say it, his version might be, “Even what kills you makes you stronger.” I have often walked the Stations of the Cross during the season of Lent, but this weekend for the very first time I walked the Stations of the Light at our women’s retreat in Cedar Brake. Each station commemorated a post-resurrection story—from Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene to Mary Magdalene announcing the news to the stunned disciples, from Jesus on the Road to Emmaus all the way to Pentecost.

Next I hiked along a cliff-side trail named after Mount Tabor, the mountain some consider to be the Mount of Transfiguration, the place where St. Peter said, “Lord, it is good for us to be here.” I sat in the sunlight to stay warm, and I contemplated the Stations of the Light.

There is so much imagery about light leading up to Lent, sort of like a foreshadowing of the resurrection. First we observe Advent and Christmas, when as the Gospel of John says, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” Then there is Epiphany and the light of the star that guided the wise men. As a church we’ve spent the season of Epiphany working our way through the Sermon on the Mount. We’ve heard Jesus say to us, “You are the light of the world,” and together we have sung it like a declaration, like a protest, like a communal pledge, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.”

And now we are on the mountaintop with Peter, James, and John and Jesus himself is glowing like the sun, like Moses, like God’s own beloved child. You may recall that every year Transfiguration Sunday is always the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the Sunday before Lent begins. Much like the feasting on Fat Tuesday before the fast begins, we feast ourselves on light before we enter the valley of the shadow of death. We’ve been feasting on light for weeks, months, from the birth of Jesus to this mountaintop experience with shiny Jesus. Maybe after all the miraculous things Jesus has done up to this point, it’s not all that surprising that suddenly both Moses and Elijah appear beside him on the mountain as if they had never died. There they are, plain as day, and without any nametags or announcements, everyone knows who they are.

The disciples, we take it, are a bit dumbfounded. Peter, as usual, pipes up first and reveals his cluelessness, though everyone on the mountain just ignores him. The disciples seem a little confused about what this moment is and why it’s happening and what they should do about it. But I don’t get the sense that they are scared. If Peter were feeling frightened, I don’t think he’d be dreaming up dwellings for Jesus so the ghost-men could stick around.

But like I said, no one on the mountain is paying attention to Peter, so while Peter is still talking, a cloud descends and a voice interrupts the tent planning. This is when things get spooky for the disciples. In the Gospel of Mark, the disciples get spooked earlier, as soon as they see Moses and Elijah, but, then, the disciples in Mark are often quite skittish. In Matthew and Luke, however,

the disciples don't get frightened until now, when the cloud descends. I find myself asking, why now? Why not freak out as soon as you see dead men talking to Jesus?

I wonder if perhaps the presence of Moses and Elijah is something they could somewhat understand—at least, they felt they could figure it out in time, if only the two prophets would stick around and stay for a while. If only Peter could house and contain them in a dwelling for contemplation and analysis.

But the *cloud*—the cloud is a different thing altogether. Suddenly the disciples are covered up and overwhelmed by it. There is no way they can house and contain this; the cloud consumes them instead. The term of the mystics, “cloud of unknowing,” seems appropriate here. Matthew is the only writer who calls it a “bright cloud,” but all three synoptic Gospels say the cloud overshadowed them. Everything they had seen on that mountain, they can no longer see. In fact, they can't really see at all. Shiny Jesus is blocked out by the cloud like a solar eclipse. Whether it was a blinding brightness or a thick fog, a sort of darkness settles down around them like a smog, like an unexpected grief, like the dead of night invading the midday.

And now the disciples are terrified, like waking up one morning to find the sun didn't rise. Have you ever had a morning like that? Not literally, but spiritually. Not literally, but emotionally. Has it ever seemed like you were living life, and then suddenly the light went out? How did you respond? Were you frightened? Were you numb? Were you frozen? Did you fall to the ground like the disciples, more paralyzed than anything else? Nearly everyone can relate to the experience of staggering disorientation—a time in life when darkness takes over, often without warning.

When the disciples fall to the ground overcome by their fear, Jesus comes over to them, touches them, and says, “Get up, and do not be afraid.” When they get up, the scary cloud is gone, just like that. Poof! It's over, almost as if God were just having a bit of fun, like God's version of popping out of hiding and shouting, “Boo!” Really the whole event is rather strange . . . *unless* you remember that these disciples are about to walk through a very dark cloud as they follow Jesus all the way to the cross. All his miracles, all his mercy and kindness, all his love will be overshadowed by death like a solar eclipse. Darkness will settle down upon the earth like a smog, like an unexpected grief, like the dead of night invading the midday. When you remember what's coming next, the dark moment on the mountain—brief as it was—feels less like a humorous prank and more like a training ground for learning the terrain of fear and despair.

One time at a speaking event, I was asked how I found my voice and when did I know that I had found it? I was befuddled at first. Then a specific memory came to me. A few years ago I received a harsh, condemning letter from someone I love attacking my writing and my poetry and my character, telling me I ought to be ashamed of the way I write and the things I say and the choices I make. It was a very painful letter.

But a few days after receiving such a demoralizing correspondence, I realized I had a choice in front of me: I could stop writing. Or I could keep writing. I could hide my words from the world for fear of saying something wrong, for fear of being misunderstood, for fear of hurting someone's feelings, for fear of attack. Or I could keep putting my words out there—even if I had

to weather mistakes and criticism and misunderstandings and, God forbid, embarrassing typos. I could live my life and use my God-given voice as a flawed human being. Or I could just not live and lock my voice away. You might be able to guess which option I chose.

I decided there wasn't anything big enough or scary enough that could persuade me to give up. Of course, I've gotten scared so many times since. The difference is that now I know something about myself that I didn't know before—fear is nearly always there, but fear doesn't get to be the boss of me. The fear may knock me to the ground, but I am capable of getting back up.

I wonder at what point Peter knew he had found his courage? Was it when he dropped his fishing nets and followed? When he stepped out of the boat onto water? Was it this moment on the mountain, first bewildered by the Moses and Elijah and the shimmering Christ, then frightened out of his mind by the thick cloud of unknowing? Jesus said, "Get up," and Peter did, and by doing so he learned something very important about himself. Fear would often be there, but fear didn't get to be the boss of him—not permanently. Fear might knock him to the ground, but he wasn't going to stay down.

At what point did Christ build up enough courage to face the cross? Was that courage in him always? Did he know it was there, or did he have to discover his courage choice by choice by choice, moment by moment?

To give another personal example, I remember how much I panicked about getting a divorce, for many reasons—relational, emotional, social. Regarding my vocation, barely any churches in Texas even hire women as pastors. No church was going to hire a divorced woman! At least, that's what the cloud of fear told me. But then I listened deeper, and there was a different voice coming out from the cloud. It might have said, "This my daughter, my beloved." What I heard was, "You've overcome stigma before. You can do it again," and my soul replied, "Oh! Why didn't I think of that?" And from that point on, I was less afraid.

I've often wondered why Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone about their experience on the mountain "until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." But I wonder if that's because he understood courage takes time to grow. He wanted them to bury this mountaintop memory like a seed, and keep watering it through the night. Keep it in close, give it time to sprout.

No one is born with a fully developed brave heart. You have to build one up over time. You face one fear, and then another on repeat until one day you surprise yourself with the strength of your own courage, like discovering you can bench-press more than your body weight, but only after months of practice. You don't start out being able to overcome the full weight of your fears. But you practice, one fear at a time, and the muscles of your courage grow.

I don't think that the Transfiguration sprinkled Jesus with some sort of magic holy dust so that he could endure the cross. I don't think the Transfiguration gave the disciples any magic either. But I do think it was one of those courage-building exercises that prepared them for the way ahead. Have you ever considered that maybe even Jesus had to work up to having enough courage to die? Maybe all those times he stood up to the Pharisees and religious leaders were practice for

the bigger resistance of the cross. Maybe all those moments of light and healing were practice for the trust it would require to endure. Who knows? Maybe Jesus was even building up his capacity to resurrect.

If ever you have a mountaintop experience or catch a glimpse of the divine, preserve that memory for a scary day, then remind yourself of the light you have seen and how the light was good. When the cloud overshadows you, remind yourself of the clouds you have encountered before, and how you made it through. When you fall down in fright, remind yourself you know how to stand. When you are swallowed up by confusion and disorientation, listen to see if God is speaking through the fog. Expect that the message will be something simple, like, "You are my beloved. Get up. You are stronger than your fears." You may not get answers to your questions, but you will be given strength for the journey.

What threatens to kill you will only make you stronger by the power of the resurrecting Christ who is light, who is courage, who is supernatural resilience, who is your Savior and your friend. When you are paralyzed by fear, imagine it is Christ himself who comes over to where you are fallen and moaning, curled up and shivering, shriveled and despairing, and it is Christ who touches you on the shoulder, who whispers in your ear, "Get up. Do not be afraid. I am with you."

There will be dark days ahead, and there have been dark days before. Yet central to our faith is this truth, as articulated by the Gospel of John, "In Christ was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not, cannot, will not overcome it." Even if you find that hard to believe, Jesus says you only need a mustard seed-sized amount of faith, and that will be enough. May you plant your belief in light in the rich soil of your heart, and watch in amazement as courage sprouts, again and again. Peter tells us to hold on to the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and I take it he knows this from experience. He says you will do well to pay attention to God's message, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Together, may we keep the faith, all the way through Lent, through the cross, and on to the empty tomb. Amen.