

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany – February 19, 2023

“Listen. Rise. Fear not.”

ST. THOMAS’ EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ST. PETERSBURG, FL

Exodus 24: 12-18 • Psalm 2 • 2 Peter 1: 16-21 • Matthew 17:1-9



You are so close to the life to which God has called you. As we stand on the precipice of Lent, know this. You are so close to the life to which God has called you. We have experienced the patient waiting and expectation of Advent. We made room for the Christ child wherever we could, pushing together some dry straw and calling it good. We sang with the angels at Jesus’ birth but quickly returned to work and to all our usual patterns. We paused to reflect on the Magi, their miraculous journey, their mysterious gifts, their clandestine exit. We worshipped with Anna and Simeon in the temple as with awe we saw Jesus presented and recognized for who he was. Truth be told we sat in the back row and slipped out quietly just as soon as it was over, but we were there for it, even if we’re still a little fuzzy on the details. And now, as we stand on the precipice of Lent, our most challenging season if we do it right, we hear about another precipice. A mountain top where Jesus transfigured in glory left a stammering Peter bewildered. Our temptation, like Peter’s, to back away from the ledge that leads down to our whole lives and just stay there, paused, frozen in time,

forever. If we squint, as we look across that valley, we can see another hill. A dangerous hill, studded with vertical trunks awaiting their crossbars. And beyond that hill, though we cannot see it from here, is a hole in the ground, an empty cave and great stone waiting to be pushed into place to seal it away forever. Past that, we cannot see. Let's just stay here, Peter says, where we know what's going on. Let's just stay here, and not walk that Lenten pathway down the mountain. It'll be easier. Sure, it'll be easier. But the glory will fade and then we'll just be alone on a mountain. Our calling is down there. God's people are down there. Ministry is down there. You are so close to the life to which God has called you.

"Listen to him!" A voice thunders. It awakens you from your day dream. This is your first step. Figuratively, spiritually, but also literally. Figuratively, this is the first step to walking the pilgrim path of Lent down the mountain. Spiritually, this the first step to growing closer to God. Literally, you must hear the word of God to follow the word of God. When the world seems busy or even out of control, when the events of the front page paralyze you with dread or overwhelm you with depression, we need more than ever to come to church to hear God's word. To gather together, to worship together, to be together,

suffused with the word of God. We need to listen. What we hear may differ. All of us come from different backgrounds and circumstances, we all have different things going on, and so what we hear might be different, but that is ok. That's what it means to be in community; we are not automatons. The best way to follow Jesus starts with us listening to him. What does he say? Who does he say it to? To whom does he offer his healing hand? With whom does he choose to spend his time? What is it that all of this says to us? Can we trust that even those with whom we disagree are doing the same thing? Listen to him.

Jesus said, "Get up." That's the second word for today. Get up. Greek scholars write that the word Jesus uses here is the same word used later at his resurrection where it says, "he is raised." So, this word to us could just as easily be, "Rise!" or even, "Come back to life!" In our Bible study over the last several Wednesday nights we read some incredible stories of women who followed God despite constricting circumstances. One of those women was Esther who, through some daring realpolitik maneuvers, effected nothing short of a coup-d'état. It's a pretty exciting story, honestly. One of the fascinating things we discovered was about the diction chosen for the writing of this story. For the first four chapters the only verbs used to describe Esther's actions were passive verbs.

Then, all of a sudden, a new type of verb is used when she sort of wakes up to what is happening around her. It was a verb meaning “to start,” but it was written in the reflexive, making it have the sense of “she started herself.” This is what we have to do, too. Jesus said to the disciples on that mountain top, “Get up.” Be raised. Come back to life. Get yourself started. It’s a call to action. After we have listened to him then we have to get ourselves started. This will shape the Lenten path you could begin very soon. You are so close to the life to which God has called you. Get up.

The last word Jesus says to the disciples up there is one of the most common phrases in the Bible. Do not be afraid. Often we think of this in the context of messages from angels. It seems like every time an angel shows up in the Bible this is what they say first. You know what that tells you? It tells you when an angel shows up it’s a scary experience. So when Jesus says, do not be afraid, it should tell us the same. What he is about to undergo – this trip down the mountain, back to the valley, back to the people, up to the hill of Golgotha and down even into Hell itself – it tells us that this is gonna be scary. Fear is a reality in all of our lives at one time or another. And don’t think that a careless lack of fear is a hallmark of faith. It isn’t. Instead, try recognizing that God

created us not for death but for resurrection. We heard it last week, right?

Choose life. When we know that, when we feel that in our bones, we can step boldly upon the path back down the mountain. We can enter this season of Lent with confidence that when we confront our inmost selves and see the ugly things we've tried to hide away, that we don't have to fear them. We can take courage that God loves us and wants us to live our lives fully, to their greatest extent. Unburdening ourselves of our spiritual baggage helps us do that, but so many of us stop short of it because it makes us afraid. And yet, and yet Jesus says to us, "Do not be afraid."

You are so close to the life to which God has called you. You have been entrusted with this holy vision of divine transfiguration. You have been created for life and for ministry.

Listen to him!

Get up!

Fear not!

Amen.