

**Feb. 23, 2020 Transfiguration Sunday I John 4: 16b-19;
Matthew 17: 1-9**

Prayer: Dear Lord, We welcome you into this service. Help the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Little Transfigurations

When I came to Triune 14 and a half years ago, I was mystified by some of the behaviors I found.

A man who got a job, worked two weeks and walked away.

A woman who turned down safe housing and returned to her pimp.

Someone who asked for something and couldn't wait five minutes for me to go and get it. I'd come downstairs with a coat or a bag of food and they'd be gone.

Years later, as we began to hire staff, I learned a lot from them about what was going on.

Robin Barton taught me about trauma-informed care, how early childhood experiences or even trauma in adult life can change one's outlook, one's trust factors, one's ability to maneuver in the world.

Beth Messick taught me about the effect of sexual trauma on a girl's developing brain. Beth then moved on to become director of Jasmine Road, which seeks to remove women from the sex trade.

And our counselor Hal Stewart taught me how much a single emotion can cripple us, paralyze us, keep us from taking action.

Do you know what that emotion is? Fear.

Fear of failure. Fear of rejection. Fear of what people think. Fear of being too old, too young, too uneducated, too uncultured, too inhibited, too timid, too, too, too... whatever.

And so we stay in that job we hate, in that abusive relationship, in that addiction that is killing us. Because as horrible as it is, we are more afraid of what might lie beyond.

I can only believe that the good people who are supporting bad actions on the national stage are doing so out of fear – fear of a worse economy, fear of freer access to abortion, fear of *the other* threatening their long-held supremacy.

I am praying every day between now and November for God to remove the fear from our hearts so that we may hear what is being said more clearly. So that we can see behaviors more starkly. So that we can judge candidates honestly without the cloud of fear.

Did you ever wonder why so many passages in the Bible talk about fear? “Fear not,” was always the first thing out of an angel’s mouth. “Do not be afraid.”

The biblical storytellers knew that fear would be our human reaction to anything new, anything unknown, virtually anything at all.

On a visit to my office one day, Hal reminded me of the passage I should probably preach every Sunday: “**Perfect love casts out fear.**”

If you would like to read along, the complete statement he quoted comes from the epistle of **I John 4: 16b-19**:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may *have boldness* on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.

There is no fear in love, but *perfect love casts out fear*; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.”

We love because he first loved us.

I think if we could *really* believe that, everything would change. Confident in God’s overwhelming, already given love, we could be

secure enough to live unafraid. We would not feel threatened because we would know there's enough love to go around. We could be secure enough to live with the boldness this letter writer John speaks of.

It is as the psychologists tell us about child development. When a child is loved and cared for, she develops a trust in the world, a boldness to step out because she knows she matters. When a child is not cared for, he is always searching, grasping, never trusting, fearful that anything he has can be snatched away.

It's hard to be bold when you're full of fear.

I heard someone once say that hate is not the opposite of love. Indifference is the opposite of love.

Hate, at least, implies strong feelings. Indifference is the absence of feelings.

But after reading this passage from the very wise writer of I John, I might go a step further. I think I would say: The opposite of love is fear.

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Whereas love gives us boldness, releases us to create, makes us big,... fear makes us wary, reins us in, makes us small.

I get rid of books monthly, taking them to our church library or our little lending library that Bucky Tarleton built in the parking lot, or to Mr. K's. But one I will never part with is a book called *The Artist's Way*, published in 1992 by Julia Cameron and Mark Bryan.

The Artist's Way talks about how creative people are often blocked by fear. And it talks about how if you are meant to be a visual artist and don't allow yourself to do it, you'll constantly be redecorating your house and moving the furniture around.

If you are meant to be a novelist and don't allow yourself to do it, you'll work at an ad agency or a newspaper. But watch out! That creativity will burst out one way or another.

The entire book is an attempt to get people to push past their inner critic, that voice that says, *Don't be absurd. You can't paint or*

write or sculpt or dance or sing or play guitar. The entire book is an encouragement for people to live into their God-given creativity.

I hope that Brian Jaudon's class on giftedness that begins March 4 will tackle that demonic inner critic. Because she's vicious.

In the church year, today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent. As Scripture lays out the story, there's the transfiguration of Jesus when he is proclaimed the holy God, then the journey to the cross, then his resurrection. Lent is bookended between these two pictures of a glorified Savior.

Today's passage in the gospel of Matthew is that first bookend. It tells of a literal mountaintop experience, a point in which Jesus was recognized and identified as no less than the beloved Son of God.

Matthew deliberately likens it to a passage in the book of Exodus in which Moses went up a mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. Moses entered a cloud and heard the voice of God.

Please turn to **Matthew 17: 1-9** and let's read how Jesus, whom this gospel writer pictured as the new Moses, underwent a similar experience. And Moses himself – along with the similarly celebrated Elijah -- met him there. It is a charming meeting of Old and New Testament characters.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

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 make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed

them, and from the cloud a voice 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 looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹ As 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.'

Even in the face of a glorified Lord, fear raised its ugly head.

Even in the presence of their greatest Scriptural heroes, fear raised its ugly head.

Even on the mountaintop, fear raised its ugly head.

These, of course, are the same disciples who will run away in fear when Jesus faces his final suffering and death in the upcoming weeks.

Even in the midst of the greatest story ever told, the narrative of fear is laced into every sentence.

Closer to home, fear plays a huge role in addiction. In the early stages, someone may look to heroin or meth or alcohol because of fear of peer rejection or to calm anxiety or to forget for awhile the very real fears in his or her life. I've had addicts tell me, "If you saw what I see when I close my eyes, you'd drink, too."

That may well be. But putting drugs or alcohol on fear doesn't kill it. It nourishes it. It feeds it.

Twelve times every week, former addicts meet in this church to face their fears together. For fears faced together are fears diminished.

In Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous and Pornographers Anonymous, they essentially say to each other what Jesus said to his disciples on the mountaintop: *Get up and do not be afraid.*

There is nothing we do here that is more important.

When I speak to book clubs or civic groups on church gatherings, the one question I always get is: “Aren’t you afraid?”

What they mean is afraid for my physical safety. Afraid of box cutters and two-by-fours and wildly swinging golf clubs. Afraid of toothpaste.

And I tell them, no, that kind of fear has never been part of this job.

But another kind most certainly has.

And that was a fear of failure.

Because long after other people were seeing the good things going on here, all I could see were the problems. The stealing. The abuses. The lying. The trash. Staff issues. The fact that to this very day we cannot leave doors unlocked.

And I now see that focus on the negatives is another form of fear. A fear that narrows our world. A fear that drags us down and prevents us from acting boldly, creatively. A fear that makes us say, “That would never work.”

A fearful outlook is one in which all we see of ourselves is a collection of our problems. Our identity is defined by our problems.

Hal Stewart said that the first thing he does when he counsels people is to try to get them to voice their gratitude. It is hard, he said, to be grateful and fearful at the same time.

So he tries to get people to widen their vision, to see their strengths, to see themselves in whole rather than as the problem that brought them to his office.

Does God see us as a bundle of problems? I don't think so. I suspect he sees us as better than we are. I suspect he sees our potential, our best possible selves, what we can be when we muscle past the fear.

Jesus was transfigured on a mountaintop near the end of his earthly ministry as a way of proclaiming his divinity. In the midst of it, his very human buddies **“fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ ”**

He says it still. And we are transfigured when we allow Jesus's perfect love to cast out our fears. We are emboldened, enlivened, energized. We are grateful.

Someone challenged me recently to focus on the brokenness of our all our worshipers, not just our addicted and homeless ones. She was right that all of us are broken. Some breaks are just more obvious, more visible, than others.

And disease is certainly one of the great equalizers. We have, as any congregation does, worshipers and volunteers and friends facing any number of physical and mental ailments. Cancer. Lung transplants. Heart attacks. Stroke. Dialysis. Neuropathy. Lou Gehrig's disease. Muscular sclerosis. Dementia. Bipolar disorder. Schizophrenia. Brain cysts.

All of these things bring fear. Fear of the future, fear of worsening conditions, fear of pain, fear of the unknown. I think this where the church, despite all its problems, has traditionally shone.

There are many churches in this community where I would not be welcome – at least not in the pulpit. I might disagree with their theology, with their mission focus, with whom they welcome and don't welcome.

But I'd be willing to bet that if there's a death, they're providing a meal. If there's a cancer diagnosis, they're visiting and driving to doctors' appointments and holding someone's hand. If there's a mission opportunity, they're digging into their pockets.

I'm willing to bet there is quiet ministry going on, a coming alongside when another is facing fear. I would only like to persuade them to extend their circle a little, to not allow fear to drive their conversation about the community they welcome.

Many of you may have visited the lovely Cancer Survivors' Park along the Swamp Rabbit Trail behind the Chamber of Commerce. Artist Charles Pate, who is the son of Charlie Pate whose Madonna and Child hangs in our dining room, won the sculpture commission for the park.

Charles' sculpture depicts a thin bald child curled into the warm, protective embrace of a powerful lion. Knowing Charles, I imagine that animal is the Lion of Judah.

And the sculpture's title? "Fear Not."

Amen.