
Do Not Be Afraid

**A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
Last Sunday after the Epiphany – Year A**

Well, did you hear about the little boy who threw a tantrum after his brother's baptism? The boy and his mother were coming home from the service when the child started to cry. He cried harder and harder, turned beet red, and starting shaking. His mother kept asking him what was wrong, but he wouldn't say. Only later did he break down and confess: "Mom, that preacher who baptized Jimmy said he wants us to grow up in a good Christian home, but I want to stay with you and Dad!"

Truth be told, the little boy's concerns weren't completely off base. While switching families isn't usually part of the drill, baptism is, in fact, intended to be a life changing event. Committing ourselves—and our children—to following Jesus—is a big deal, one that has all sorts of implications for how we live our lives.

Our gospel lesson this morning finds Peter, James, and John wrestling with this very issue—the issue of how to live their lives now that they have given themselves over to Jesus, now that they have left behind all they have ever known and loved to follow this itinerant preacher from one podunk town to another, eating with outcasts and sinners, gaining both friends and foes.

Things start out all right. The disciples go up a high mountain and have one of those extraordinary religious experiences your grandmother used to read about in *Guideposts Magazine* while waiting to see the endodontist. All of a sudden, Jesus' face starts to gleam and his clothes turn dazzling white. The disciples see this, and think, "Well, now this is good; this is really good!" So good, in fact, that Peter offers to put up some tents and fairy lights so they can keep the party going all night. But then something happens, something that scares them. Maybe it's nagging doubts about all they have given up to be here or concerns about how while Jesus can get his glow on high atop a mountain, he's still having trouble down below. Maybe it's the voice of God that comes booming in unbidden, hushing the disciples like some old high school algebra teacher intent on spoiling their fun. Or it could just be that a face that suddenly starts shimmering and shining without the aid of dermabrasion was a freaky sight even in biblical times. I don't know, and, frankly, it doesn't matter that much. What really matters is not what causes the disciples' fear but, rather, what Jesus does—and doesn't do—in response to it. For starters, Jesus doesn't mock the disciples. He doesn't shame them for their lack of faith. And he doesn't leave them. What he does do is reach out to them. In the midst of their fear and trembling, he touches them. He touches them and speaks words of healing and hope: "Get up!" he says. "Get up and do not be afraid."

You don't have to have a degree in theology to know that this passage has a lot to say to us today. A study published by *Time* magazine not long ago revealed that while we live in what is statistically the safest period in human history, our individual and collective anxieties are spreading like wildfire. We live in a time of great fear—the sort of fear that causes people to choose their seats at the movies based not on how well they can see the screen but on how quickly they can make it to the exits in case someone starts shooting. The sort of fear that can make otherwise open minded adults think about getting off a flight when they see someone in traditional Middle Eastern dress board their plane. The sort of fear that manifests itself in ways so insidious we hardly even notice them anymore—like how we spend more time arguing politics on social media than having real conversations with the people sitting right beside us, or how we feel sure our children's lives will be ruined if they don't get into a certain college or land a certain type of job, or how, over time, we begin to accept various human rights abuses as necessary sacrifices because, well, maybe we really are safer now, after all.

In such a time—a time of widespread fear and foreboding— Jesus' words of comfort and reassurance are

words to hold on to. So much so, that if you go home from church this morning with nothing else at all, then go home with these words ringing in your ears and burning in your heart: “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid.

Now there’s another way of saying this very thing. It’s a sentence you’ll be hearing again in just a few minutes: “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.” *Marked as Christ’s own forever.* In good times and in bad, on mountaintops and in the valleys far below, soaking up visions of awe and wonder and shrinking in horror from scenes of death and destruction—in all of this, you belong to Jesus. The One from whom nothing can ever separate us—not hardship or distress or persecution or famine or sword or cancer or mass shootings or job loss or chaos in Washington or crippling depression or anything else in all creation. Nothing! You and I—just like those first fearful disciples—you and I are not only touched, but held, by a force of love that will never let us go. And so we can say, even as the political pundits rage and the forest fires burn and the oceans rise and the white supremacists gather for training on a farm only an hour north of Atlanta and we lie awake nights worried about what sort of country we are going for leave to our children and grandchildren—even as we face all of this, we can still say along with the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can anyone do to me?”

But there’s something else, as well. Something else that Jesus tells his disciples in the midst of their fear and trembling. He commands them to “Get up.” Get up. Which is another way of saying to those of us who have been touched by Jesus, “Hit the road.” You see, the gift of baptism—the gift of knowing we are “marked as Christ’s own forever”—is not something to keep to ourselves. Just as Peter, James, and John leave the glory of the mountain to go back down and minister with Jesus in a broken and troubled world, so you and I are called to go out from this place today “in witness to [God’s] love.” This is why we take vows at baptism, why we answer questions like these: *Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?* These are all questions that ask us, as the poet Mary Oliver once put it, “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” What is it you plan to do with your “one wild and precious life” now that you have been set free from fear and despair and marked as Christ’s own forever? What are you going to do? The call to followers of Jesus is to get up and go out—even though we don’t always know where we are heading, even though the path may be dimly lit, even though we will stumble, again and again and again. Get up and go out. Get up and do not be afraid. Get up and offer to others, in ways both great and small, Christ’s gifts of love, compassion, and peace. If you and I do this, if we get up and go out, if we resolve even just to make a start, then we will come to know true glory: not a continual string of mountaintop highs, not a life without pain and suffering, but a life filled with meaning and purpose, a life lived in service of the things that truly matter. What more could we hope for ourselves? What more could we dream for our children? What more could we offer our world? Amen.