

THE MESSAGE CONFIRMED
(2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9)

Mountains can be frightening places.

Years ago I decided to climb Mount Washington. It was a beautiful fall day, temperature in the 60s, not a cloud in the sky, and off I went with my turtleneck, cotton shirt and windbreaker. After climbing for a while I got up to treeline and started seeing the signs warning how bad the weather could be and advising hikers to turn back if it looked threatening. I was younger then and in good shape, so I kept on going. And before I knew it, the wind started to blow and the clouds rolled in. I wasn't just younger, I was pretty stupid, so I kept on going. Pretty soon I couldn't see the cairns that mark the trail and ice was forming on the rocks. Did I say I was a more stupid back then? Well, I was because I kept on going, and even stopped to take a few pictures of the ice so I could prove to anyone who doubted it just how stupid I was. The only smart thing I did was find the cog railway tracks that I knew would lead me to the summit where I could thaw out.

I could have become a statistic on Mount Washington that day. More than a hundred people have died of exposure on that mountain when the weather caught them by surprise. And if I had had any sense, I should have been afraid that I might add to the number. The fact that I'm here today proves that I didn't, but I did come away with a lot more respect for the mountain and hopefully with a little more sense about knowing when to stop pushing the limits and turn back.

I've been to the top of Mount Washington other times when the experience was very different, when there wasn't a cloud in the sky and you could see for miles and miles in every direction. The view is awe inspiring. When we talk about "mountaintop experiences" that's usually more what we have in mind – those experiences that are highs in every way, not just in terms of elevation, but psychologically and emotionally as well.

My climb to the top of Mount Washington reminded me that there's another kind of mountaintop experience that isn't so much fun – a kind that gets the adrenaline pumping instead of the endorphins. What happened to Peter, James, and John that day was that kind of experience – more than a nice hike to the top of a mountain to enjoy the view. It was something they weren't expecting and something that must have scared them out of their wits.

We don't much think of faith and fear as somehow going together. But there's a sense in which they do. There's a lot of fear in the Bible, and it's faithful people who are afraid. People were afraid of Jesus and his disciples most of all.

When Jesus helps the disciples after they've spent all night fishing without catching anything and they bring in so many fish the boat's about to sink, they're afraid (Lk. 5:4-8). When they're caught in a storm and Jesus calms the waves, they're afraid (Mt. 8: 23-27). When the women get to the tomb on Easter morning and find it empty, they were afraid (Mk. 16:8).

Time after time Jesus has to say to the disciples, “Don’t be afraid.” Presumably he said it for a very good reason and not just to have something to say: He said it because they were afraid.

Is that something we can relate to?

In one sense I hope not. There’s a fire-and-brimstone brand of Christianity that runs on fear, which was the brand I grew up with. They figured they could make hell such a terrifying place that people would be scared into believing. It seemed to work with some people, but it didn’t quite work with me. Oh, it scared me all right when I was young, but never enough, I guess.

None of you are here, I hope, because you’re afraid something really bad will happen to you if you don’t come to church. We don’t use fear as a motivator.

And yet, there is a lot in the world to be afraid of. After 9/11 people poured into churches, people who hadn’t darkened the door of a church in years, if ever. People were afraid. There are people who won’t fly on an airplane since 9/11. They’re afraid.

When you were young your mother told you the street was a dangerous place. You didn’t even think about crossing it unless someone was holding your hand. Being a little bit afraid of the street was a good thing. When you got older you were given permission to cross the street on your own, with just a reminder to look both ways. You lost the fear of the street and learned to respect it instead.

The kind of fear we find in the Bible is a different kind of fear – not the kind that comes from living in a dangerous world where all sorts of bad things can and do happen. No, the kind of fear the Bible talks about is fear that comes from being in the presence of the divine, that comes from encountering God.

For years we’ve heard and read that people are on a spiritual quest, eager for mystical, spiritual experiences. I just wonder how many of them realize what they’re asking for or what might happen if they have a real honest-to-goodness spiritual experience. Peter and James and John didn’t expect what they got when they hiked up the mountain with Jesus.

I remember back in seminary talking to one of my classmates about why we were doing this crazy thing, studying for the ministry. He said some strange things had happened in his life, things he couldn’t explain – weird revelations and realizations – and for a long time he tried to ignore them or chalk them up to something simple, kind of like Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* trying to dismiss Marley’s ghost as something brought on by a “slight disorder of the stomach,” “an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, or a fragment of underdone potato.” But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t let it go that easily. He had asked his pastor, who he figured was a kind of expert on God, what it all meant. And the pastor said, “Well, it all sounds suspiciously like the voice of God, like God intruding into your life, calling you to do something.” And my classmate moaned, “I was afraid that’s what you were going to say.”

He knew that an encounter with God could be demanding, that you don’t come away from a meeting with God unscathed, that you’re apt to come away changed in ways you never expected. It was something he was afraid of.

Maybe the most frightening thing about any encounter with Jesus comes because we know where he's headed and because we know that he expects us to go with him. Jesus on the mountain was on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. The voice from the cloud confirmed that: "This is my Son, the Beloved...Listen to him!" Listen when he says "Follow." Listen when he says "Deny yourself." Listen when he says "Take up your cross."

Those are frightening commands. The good news is that we're not on our own, we don't have to do it all by ourselves. There is a cost to discipleship, to be sure, but there's joy as well – joy of a life lived under the shelter of the one who was tempted and betrayed, who experienced pain and loss, suffered and died and rose again so that we, too, can share in the new and abundant life that he offers.