

East Liberty Presbyterian Church

**Guest preacher: The Reverend Dr. Margaret Aymer, Associate Professor of
New Testament – The Interdenominational Theological Center**

February 19, 2012

Matthew 17:1-13

“Rise Up and Fear Not”

Sisters and brothers of East Liberty Presbyterian Church, buenos dias! It is good to be among the saints in Pittsburgh. I bring you love and greetings from the Rev. Dr. Ronald Peters, the President of the Interdenominational Theological Center, where I serve as professor of New Testament. I also bring you greetings from the Rev. Paul Roberts, dean of Johnson C. Smith seminary, a sister Presbyterian seminary to Pittsburgh seminary, and a consortial member of the Center. Central Presbyterian Church of Atlanta, Georgia, also greets you. I ask that you pray with me:

Holy Spirit, presence of the living God, move through me that the words that I speak may bear witness to power of the transfigured Christ and to his ultimate Sovereign reign in which where the poor in spirit are blessed and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are satisfied, in the name of that Christ Jesus, I pray. Amen.

Sisters and brothers, today is Transfiguration Sunday. And as such, I would like us to turn our attention to Matthew's telling of this great occurrence. In particular, I would like us to focus on Jesus' command to the disciples at the end of the Matthean account of the Transfiguration. Jesus turns to his disciples, and commands them: “Rise up and fear not.” Now, as liturgy is the work of the people, and as I am in Pittsburgh, which is legendary for its football crowds, I want to warn you that this is an audience-participation sermon. You see, I teach at an historically-black seminary, one that teaches women and men from every race under the sun while holding to the uniquely American traditions of the Black church. This is not only Transfiguration Sunday, but also black history month. So today, we're going to do a bit of both. I invite you, as you are comfortable, to “talk back” to the sermon, but I promise this will not be hard. As you see, the title of this sermon is “rise up and fear not.” So, whenever I say “Rise up,” I ask that you respond “And fear not.”

“Rise up...” *And fear not*

“Rise up...” *And fear not*

“Rise up...” *And fear not*

Sisters and brothers, we have been walking in a season of epiphany since the coming of the magi on the 6th of January. Since that time, our scriptures have been revealing, bit by bit, just exactly who this angel-sung, shepherd-worshiped, magi-gifted Jesus is. Today's scripture reveals to us the ultimate epiphany: the metamorphosed Jesus, his face shining like the sun. Today, we tell the story of the cloud that enveloped the mountain. Today, we repeat the words of that great voice

from the cloud: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." This is a familiar passage; we hear it and we say to ourselves, ah this story! I know this story. But do we? Do we really catch the vision from the top of that mountain? Is Transfiguration Sunday just a day to say to the rest of the world: See, we TOLD you he is the Son of God? Is that all there is to the epiphany we call the Transfiguration? Sisters and brothers, I suggest to you that we at East Liberty, must go BACK to the mountain. For it is a mountain of counsel and of commissioning. On that mountain we will hear the counsel of the ancestors. And on that mountain, we will receive a commission from the Christ. And the commission and the counsel are captured in the comforting words of the Christ: Rise up...

First, consider how that mountain is a mountain of counsel. Listen again to the story. Matthew tells us that, after Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John: LOOK! there appeared Moses and Elijah, and they were talking to Jesus. Traditionally, we would get to these two ancestors and say "Ah HAH! Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets!" But is that really who they are? Surely Aaron the priest, or Deborah the judge could have been a representative of the law. Why Moses? Surely Nathan or Huldah, could have come on behalf of the prophets. Why Elijah?

But on this mountainside, Moses appears: the same Moses who stood up against a government that held his people in slavery! Moses appears: the same Moses who stood before a king and called him on his injustice because he discriminated against one religious group in his kingdom. Moses appears: the same Moses who repeatedly spoke the truth to power, calling all the while on the name of the Lord God Almighty. Look! says Matthew. Moses appears, the very Moses who trusted the Lord enough to rise up...

And if Moses is not enough, Elijah, appears. Elijah: the same prophet who spoke out against those corrupt religious leaders that were persecuting his people. Elijah: the same prophet who rose up against those who killed the priests. Certainly, you remember Elijah, the same prophet one who spoke the truth even in the throne room of the king. Look hard. See the vision clearly. It is Elijah, the very Elijah who left his cave of fear trusting the Lord enough to rise up...

You see, Jesus is not talking to just ANY representatives of the law and the prophets. Jesus was talking to just ANY ancestors. Jesus was talking to Moses and Elijah; Jesus was talking to the two men who knew best how to stand up, to speak the truth to power, to rise up...

And I like to think that there were others there, in that mountaintop conversation; that in their fear, the disciples didn't see. I like to think that queen Hadassah, whom we call Esther, came to Jesus with a word about fearlessness. Or that judge Deborah came to Jesus with a word about speaking the truth to power. I can just see the sisters Jael and Rahab and Shiprah and Puah, the midwives of Egypt, counseling

Jesus up there on that mountain. I can hear the prophet Nathan was there, calling Jesus to the kind of prophetic ministry he did with king David. I can feel the passion of the prophet Amos up on that mountain reminding Jesus to let justice roll down. Jesus went up the mountain, and there he was revealed in his true power; but this all-powerful, all-mighty Jesus took time to listen as the ancestors gathered to tell this fully divine, yes, but also fully human young man their truths, their fights, their struggles for justice in an unjust world. Jesus took time as the ancestors counseled him to rise up...

Sisters and brothers, listen. The ancestors call to us from Transfiguration Hill. Can you hear them? Brother Frederick Douglass calls out: "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." Sister Harriet Tubman laments: "I could have freed many more slaves if they had KNOWN they were slaves." Mother Mary McLeod Bethune teaches: "For I am my mother's daughter, and the drums of Africa still beat in my heart. They will not let me rest while there is a single Negro boy or girl without a chance to prove his worth." Brother Marcus Garvey counsels: "Be as proud of your race today as our fathers were in days of yore. We have beautiful history, and we shall create another in the future that will astonish the world." Sister Ella Baker proclaims: "We who believe in freedom shall not rest until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons." And Uncle Bayard, flamboyant uncle Bayard who organized the march on Washington in his fabulous pink suit—and out gay black man in the 1950s—he calls to us from the mountain too. Remember children, he says, "To be afraid is to behave as though the truth were not true." To be afraid is to behave as though the truth were not true.

Sisters and brothers, I declare to you that to be afraid is to behave as though Harriet, and Lena, Martin, and Booker T., Bayard, leading the march on Washington, James Baldwin, leading us from Harlem into Giovanni's room, Nelson Mandela and his late son Magaktho, who NELSON says died of AIDS, are not our ancestors who fought, and who continue to fight for freedom and justice for all people, not just for black people. To be afraid is to behave as though black history and the African diasporic struggle for freedom does not liberate every single person, female and male, literate and illiterate, those who were living with HIV and diabetes and cancer and those who were not, gay and straight, young and old, Latina/os, Asians, Native Americans, European-Americans, mixed race Americans, African Americans and any and everybody else who had the courage to rise up...

Yes, just as on that mountain, so today, here in Pittsburgh, the ancestors have come. Male and female, gay and straight, African, West Indian, South American, Asian, European and African American. They call to us to enter into counsel even as Jesus, our Afro-Asiatic brother, is transfigured in our midst. "Sisters and brothers," they call to us, "hear our voices. Rise up..."

If we are courageous, we will hear the ancestors. If we are courageous, we will hear; and like Peter, we will celebrate the coming of Moses and Elijah, and of the great cloud of witnesses. If we are courageous, sisters and brothers, Transfiguration Mountain will be our mountain of counsel. But if Transfiguration Mountain is to do us any good, if Transfiguration mountain is to do the God-beloved world any good, we cannot simply walk away with good counsel. If Transfiguration Mountain is to leave us changed, if Transfiguration Mountain is to be good news for the whole world and not just a nice Bible story, we must receive from it, we must receive from Christ, a commission, a commission that requires us to act faithfully and courageously, a commission that calls us to rise up...

Did you ever watch a two-year old playing "hide and seek"? It's the funniest thing. They will cover their eyes, and because they cannot see YOU, they reason you cannot see them. They cover their eyes because they do not understand that YOU can see, that you know exactly where they are. And we laugh because we hear Uncle Bayard saying "To be afraid is to behave as though the truth were not true." These children are behaving as though the truth were not true; if I can't see you, surely you can't see me.

We laugh when children do it, but this is exactly how the disciples were acting. They had their faces covered, their eyes to the ground. Perhaps they thought that if they couldn't see Jesus than the truth would not be true. Perhaps they thought that if they covered their faces, then they wouldn't have to know the truth: that Jesus really was God's beloved son. Perhaps, they thought, if they covered in fear, then they wouldn't really have to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and love their enemies. Perhaps, they thought, if they couldn't see Jesus in all his power and glory, they wouldn't really have to go places where they would be maligned, thrown in prison, yes, even killed in his name. Perhaps they thought that if they denied the truth about Jesus, there would be no cross at the end of that road to Jerusalem, no tomb, no grieving. Perhaps they thought that if they just didn't see Jesus, they wouldn't have to rise up...

Bayard Rustin says: To be afraid is to behave as though the truth were not true. Sisters and brothers, I say to you, to be afraid is to behave as though the call of Christ isn't a call to change our lives. To be afraid is to behave as though THIS is our only Christian witness, this Sunday morning gathering. It is to behave as though we have no right and no responsibility to be marching in support of human rights for all people. To be afraid is to behave as though we have no Christian responsibility to call for fair health care for all people, to call for available, inexpensive public transportation for all people, to call for adequate public education for all people, to call for state protection of the rights of all people to enter freely into legal contractual agreements with one another, to call for investment in housing that everyone can afford, not just the wealthiest one-percent, and to call for an end to the vicious taking of human life called the death penalty.

Sisters and brothers, to be afraid is to behave as though it is not our responsibility to face our own internal struggles around sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, xenophobia, and yes, especially, racism. To be afraid is to behave as though the body of Christ does not have AIDS. To be afraid is to behave as though as followers of Jesus Christ in the United States of America, we bear no responsibility to speak out in protest of a war against brown people, fought by brown people, for black oil, green dollars, and the greed of a few, very powerful rich white men who call themselves Christians. To be afraid to behave as though our response our holy meal, the breaking of body and pouring out of blood that we call the Lord's Supper, is only and exclusively to read our Bibles and to pray for heaven without giving the hungry food, and the thirsty drink, clothing the naked, taking care of the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and welcoming the stranger. Bayard says: To be afraid is to behave as though the truth were not true.

And Jesus walks over to each of us, reaches out his hand, touches our quaking bodies just as he did to Peter, and to James, and to John. And when we look up, who do we see? Our leader, our master, our Messiah, Jesus the Christ. And, he is ordaining us. It is his hand on our heads; it is his voice calling us to stand up; it is his commission to us, in the face of this world and the struggles of this world, rise up and don't be afraid. For the sake of the millions in pain around the world, rise up, and don't be afraid. For the sake of the church, that has become so rent with schisms about who's out and who's in that it has forgotten its call to whosoever will and to the least of these, rise up, and don't be afraid. For the sake of the gospel, a gospel that calls us still to justice and peace even in the face of war and tyranny, threats to civil liberty, yes even threats to life and limb, rise up and don't be afraid.

Sisters and brothers, we are a people of the transfiguration, people who follow the Son of the living God. This is what we celebrate on Transfiguration Sunday. We are reminded of that power, the power to be fearlessly, transgressively, powerfully Christian every time we renew our baptismal vows, every time we break the bread and bless the cup, and every time we gather together as the people of God in worship. For we follow in the steps of the most fearless, the most transgressive, the most powerful of all, Jesus the Christ. It is only relying on this power that we can find the courage to walk with Jesus on the road to the cross. It is only relying on this power that we, like the ancestors before us, can find the courage to tell the truth. It is only by relying on this power that we, as Jesus' disciples in this God-beloved world, can rise up and fear not.

Amen.