

Rev. Alex Shea Will

for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC

February 27, 2022

Siblings in Christ: I love the story of the Transfiguration. I know that some clergy skip over it - as we hear it every year on the last Sunday before Lent - but I preach on it every time. Historically, the writers of the lectionary - the three year cycle of biblical readings - placed it on the final Sunday before Lent to give us a glimpse of the Christ we follow into this somber and Holy season. It is a literal Mountaintop moment, meant to gird and strengthen us for the Lenten road ahead which leads to the cross. Truthfully, in years past, that was not the reason I stayed with this scripture. Yet, as I sat down to write this sermon for you, I found myself returning to that rationale. Not because we need this story to prepare us to step into Lent - even though it is just before us. But rather, because, in this moment in which we are living, we need it to remind us of how to respond and act in a world that suddenly feels pulled into fear,

confusion, and uncertainty. I preach on it today because in it I see myself - indeed, I need to see myself - and I wonder if you might, too.

Upon first glance, it may be difficult to place ourselves in it. The story is so specific, and the supernatural elements so strong, it can be hard to find ourselves among Peter, James, and John, standing before Moses, Elijah, and the transfigured Christ. The story bends space and time, and defies logic. Yes, that is all true. But at its core, the story reminds us of the most fundamental Christian truth: When fear brings us to our knees, Christ reaches down and whispers “Get up and do not be afraid.”

Siblings in Christ: This is a week in which I have felt afraid. No, not afraid for my own life or livelihood, but rather for the world. I have felt afraid over events and circumstances I cannot control. And at times my fear has brought me to my knees - at one moment in despair, and the next in prayer. I wonder if you know that feeling? In truth, I do now know how you could look upon the events of this past week and not feel fear. If not for yourself, then for others. As war rages in Europe, legislators in Texas and Florida pass legislation that humiliates and

harms LGBT children and families, and seemingly one unbelievable thing happens after another, it seems easier and easier to find myself in this passage today, paralyzed by uncertainty and worry, joining Peter, James and John, on their knees in fear.

While I long for a world in which the only thing that we have to fear is the glory of the transfigured Christ before us, I know that is unlikely and unrealistic. To live - to be human - is to be brought to our knees in fear at some point in our lives. Very likely multiple times in our lives. That is unavoidable. Being Christian, following Christ, will not inoculate us from fear, unfortunately. Rather, what I believe this story reminds us, is that to follow Christ is to find our way out of fear once we've been brought to our knees. While we cannot avoid fear, whenever we find ourselves brought to our knees, we can look into the face of Christ - and all that is around us has faded away for a moment - and hear a voice declare to us "Get up and do not be afraid." Whatever has caused us to fear, whatever has us frozen in place, Christ reaches down to every single one of us and offers us a hand up. Indeed, for me, that is the gift

of our faith in moments such as these. That is the gift of following Christ when fear and worry takes over. The Christian life is not free from worry, hardship, or fear. It is not a free-pass from pain or grief. Rather, the gift of our faith is a God who meets us on our knees, offering a hand up, and reminding us: “Do not be afraid.” In a world in which any of the number of screens I pick up can show me images of pain and suffering, the one I set before my mind's eye whenever I'm overwhelmed, is that of the transfigured Christ, lovingly whispering that it is time to get up and learn how to not be afraid. And it's the image I invite you to behold today. In light of all there might be to fear, let us fix our eyes on the Christ, who longs to be our peace.

However, that being said, I do not think the transfigured Christ cured Peter, James and John of their fear. Let me say that again: I do not think Christ, in that moment, cured them - or cures us - of our fear. I do not think his shining face washed away their doubt. I do not believe that his words magically cast away their terror. Rather, I believe that by

accepting Christ's invitation, shaky knees and uncertain hearts and all, and by standing up and going down that mountain, following him in his ministry, they would come to find something else besides fear. They would come to know hope, love, and peace. And the same is true for us. In moments such as these, we are not only to hear and receive Christ's words of comfort, but also get up and discover Christ's peace through ministering to and serving one another

In moments such as this I think of the mothers I met in the city of Sderot, Israel - an Israeli town close to the border of Gaza. As you may know, Gaza has long been a site of conflict between Israelis and Palestians soldiers. The people of Sderot lived with daily reminders of this truth having to build playgrounds that could withstand a rocket. I remember sitting with them, in their homes, wondering where they got the strength to get out from under their fear. And it turns out for a long time they didn't know how. Until they got up, and decided to do something. They realized that if they were afraid in Sderot, there must be mothers afraid in Gaza. too. So they found a way to make contact

with those Palestinian mothers. They made calls, when possible, and they wrote notes of love and hope. They reached out to one another to say “I am afraid - and maybe you are too - but I want you to know that I love you.” Their neighbors didn’t like what they were doing. They certainly cut against the national narrative. And maybe, most strikingly, their act of defiant hope didn’t stop the fighting. But what I learned is that it gave them something to cling to besides fear - hope.

So that is what I choose to look for in these moments. The helpers - in Ukraine, in Texas, right here in the greater Boston area - they themselves who are afraid but through helping, loving, and caring for one another they are making room for something more than their fear. Doctors and nurses delivering healthy babies in subways acting a bomb shelters, churches and families providing homes and shelter for refugees, and ordinary people standing up and name what is right. The Late Fred Rogers told a story about his mother encouraging him, as a child, to “look for the helpers.” And that is good and true. But I believe Christ

calls on us not only to look for the helpers, but to be the helpers - whether we can see them or not.

Siblings in Christ: If you have felt afraid, or worried, or concerned this week, if you have been brought to your knees in fear - you are not alone. Amidst the chaos swirly, Christ gently speaks over us, reaching down to touch us, and offers us a hand up. All the while saying: "Do not be afraid." And you are not alone in covenant either. Your sister congregations in the Metropolitan Boston Association, and indeed the whole Southern New England Conference, join you in this holy work. None of us are alone. And so on this transfiguration Sunday, we get up and follow Christ down the mountain. We follow Christ into this season of Lent. We follow Christ out of these doors, off our screens, and into the world to minister in his name. Not because we are magically unafraid, but because it is through serving, loving, and ministering, we might discover something other than our fear. And maybe, before we know it, there is no room for fear anymore because our hearts have been overcome by hope. And through it, we might even transform this world,

one act of love at a time. Trusting that no matter what we fear, Christ is there. Won't the Church say Amen?