

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan**  
**“To Stand Unafraid”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, February 23, 2020**

**2 Peter 1:16-21**

*For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.*

*So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*

**Matthew 17:1-9**

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then 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.’ 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.’ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.*

*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.’*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take all the words that we've offered in worship today. The words from 2 Peter and the Gospel of Matthew and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Bless and transform all of these words into your Word and let your Word speak to each of us as we have need. Let it speak in our minds, in our hearts, in our souls. Let it comfort us and strengthen us and challenge us. Let it be what we need this day. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So today's sermon is part Bible study and part sermon. The reason that it's part Bible study is the connections that are made in this Gospel passage to Moses and Elijah. I for one, not growing up in the church, didn't really understand them all that well. And in looking this week at the text where Elijah's encounter with God, and looking again at what Moses has done, there's just so many threads that connect from the Old Testament into the Gospel of Matthew. And then specifically to this encounter with God up on the mountain. And as I was preparing for this, one of the citations that came up for Elijah and Moses were the last words that are printed in our Old Testament. And in my Bible, it has these verses from the prophet Malachi and on the next page, it says the Gospel of Matthew, and we begin reading about Jesus from Matthew's perspective. These are the last words God is speaking through the prophet Malachi. "Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all of Isreal. Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children, the hearts of children to their parents so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse." Or said in a positive vein, "so I can come and bring a blessing to all the people of Isreal." So the last words of the Old Testament name Moses and Elijah and they end the story. And then the next page, the Gospel of Matthew begins. And he picks up those threads of the Old Testament and weaves it towards this encounter that we have read today where Jesus, Elijah, and Moses are all on the mountain and then the voice of God speaks. Now the parallels with Moses, maybe some of us are more

familiar with. In the 24th chapter of Exodus, Moses goes up the mountain with three companions, just as Jesus does in our story. There is the mountain, there is the cloud, and there's six days. Moses is given the law for the benefit of the people. Jesus is going to give himself for the benefit of the people. But the parallels between Moses and Jesus are profound, especially when you think about Moses going up the mountain and getting the tablet-- the laws on the tablet. For Elijah, I-- again, I have to confess, I didn't know a ton about Elijah, and so when I read about Elijah's encounter with God on a mountain. It was sort of eye-opening. This is from 2 Kings, the 19th chapter.

"Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how Ahab had killed all the prophets beside Elijah with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a message to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me and more also if I do not make your life like the life of the ones that I have killed by this time tomorrow.' Elijah was afraid. He got up, and he fled for his life. He went to Beersheba, which belonged to Judah, and he left a servant there, then he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die. 'It is enough now, oh Lord. Take away my life. I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he laid down under the tree and fell asleep.

Suddenly, an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then laid down again. Again, the angel of the Lord came, a second time touched him and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' Elijah got up, ate and drank, then he went in the strength of that food 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the mountain of God, the same mountain that Moses received the Law upon. At that place, Elijah came to a cave and spent the night there. The word of the Lord came to him again, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' Elijah answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life to take it away.' And God said to Elijah, 'Go out, stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.'" And then I think the passage that some of us are more familiar with. "Now there was a great wind so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' Again he answered, 'I've been very zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed all your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life to take it away.' And then the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king and then anoint Jehu as king over Israel and anoint Elisha to take your place."

So in this passage, again, there's a mountain, an encounter with God, and the power of God to move Elijah to do what God wants Elijah to do. So we've got Elijah. We've got Moses. We've got this mountain. We've got God encountering Elijah and Moses on the mountain. And then, again, the last words which say, "I'm going to send Elijah before the great day of the Lord and remember the teaching of Moses," and all of this is moving forward all of it's moving forward and it comes really to a head in our text. It's woven together because Matthew was writing to a Jewish people who don't look at these things the way we do. We're Christians so we look backwards at the text and everything we see in the old testament, somewhere within us is saying, "Okay, Jesus is there. Jesus is being pre-figured or foreshadowed." But the Jewish people that Matthew was speaking to knows all the stories about Elijah and Moses, especially Moses. They love those stories and they're looking forward and being unsure about, "Okay. How does all of this fit together with what we know, with what we trust, with what we've been taught?" And Matthew is giving them in sort of the power of his story, he's naming Moses and Elijah even before he gets to the word, to their actual names. The fact that they're going up a mountain, there's three of them, there's transfiguration, there's a cloud, there's a voice. All of this is saying. "This person is in line with Moses, with Elijah, and now there is Jesus." Powerful stuff. It's a great witness of how the old testament connects to the new, and I just want to leave that kind of sitting there, and [resignating?] for us that all the energy, all the glory, all the power, all the light of God is being sort of moved from one person to another, and then into Christ. And when God says, "From the cloud, this is my son the beloved. With him I am well pleased. Listen to him." What do the disciples do? Or what do we do when we hear the voice of God speaking to us? They fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. In the light of all this glory that is being shared and sort of conferred upon Jesus, the response of the disciples is the response that we've heard over, and over, and over in the new testament, but they were terrified.

And I've been thinking about how fear in our lives, in my life gets in the way of allowing God's light to shine forth fully in what I do and what I say. I don't often hear the word of God form a cloud or really from anywhere else. I read it in scripture, but it's not fearful in scripture. It's familiar, it's friendly. We have songs, "This little light of mine. I'm going to let it shine," and, "Jesus is my

friend," and all of these things that make the voice of God in scripture comfortable for us. But if we were to hear the voice of God outside of scripture, in a dream or in an intuition, or from a friend who says exactly the right thing that we need to hear, there is decent chance that we'll be afraid. Should we trust it? Do we believe it? Is it really from God? And I think more importantly, fear gets in the way of us sharing God's love with others. It's so often shared with me, people who are being invited maybe to bake a casserole, or give time to work with the children, or some project that's going on in the life of the church, maybe going on the adult mission trip, so many times it's, "Well, I don't know if I can do that." Fear in a very subtle and surprising way just starts to wrap itself around us. When we doubt ourselves, we doubt our calling, and we doubt whether God is deciding to work through us. In a sense, fear diminishes and distorts the glory of God that is ours by believing in Christ. Our confidence, or energy is from God. Our breath is the breath of the spirit. Our light is the light of God's glory, and fear does everything it can to diminish that within us. It makes us hold back. And why I love this passage the most is Jesus' response when the disciples are on the ground, petrified with fear. "Get up. Don't be afraid."

Imagine the next time you bump up against some feeling that you're unworthy, or inadequate, or not sure if you heard those words of Jesus echoing in your soul, "Get up. Do not be afraid." Imagine getting that diagnosis that scares you to death and keeps you up at night, that makes your stomach turn and your spouse cry. Get up. Do not be afraid. Imagine how much we could change the world if we trusted in Jesus' words. "Get up. Do not be afraid." Amen.