

Sunday, February 23, 2020 – Transfiguration Sunday
“Overload?”

Matthew 17: 1-9

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Multiple Perspective Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

They'd been following him now for years. They've been called out of obscurity, this ragtag group of men and become followers, disciples of a great rabbi. He taught with authority. He healed people. He performed miracles. He cast out demons. He had shown them something true, that of Epiphany, shining more and more until it's an unmistakable, “Eureka!” moment from the mouth of a man named Simon Peter – “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Peter, James and John are led up a high mountain with Jesus. And the scope of this “true confession” that Peter made is made scarily real – in a blaze of glory Jesus lights up – shining like the sun, the radiant holiness of God absolutely overloads the senses – I guarantee you, this stained glass window, with the shades up, it's got nothing on the brightness we're talking about – and then as their eyes adjust, and even more awesome sight – the absolute heroes of the faith, Moses and Elijah are there, talking with Jesus. They'd seen a lot in Jesus but they'd never seen this before! And then they have the nerve to interrupt.

And then the sound. Low, rumbling, loud, terrifying sound. More sensory overload... and the sound is that of a voice. The voice of Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

The sudden bright light, the sudden loud sound, the low rumble shaking the ground and sending vibrations through the air, and all that God-stuff, too – afraid is almost too light a word to describe their plight! And yet that's what governs the disciples – **fear**.

It's fear you can see – the disciples are on overload. Can you see them, face down in the rock, eyes squeezed shut, fingers locked tight over the back of their heads, arms pressed against their ears? ... and just as soon as it started, the next thing they feel is a touch. A gentle touch, from Jesus. And gentle words, “Don't be afraid.” And gentle on the eyes, too... Jesus, not lit up; Jesus like he looked the day they first were called to follow him.

Fear is a natural reaction to an encounter with God – actual or imagined. I've seen it at deathbeds – people remember their sins and imagine God's eyes burning with hatred against

them. I've seen it in counseling and confession appointments in my office – forgiveness is for other people, not me. I see it in people long absent from worship... only half joking that the roof would cave in if they set foot in this space. The very thought of encountering God – in worship or at his throne on the Last Day leads to its own kind of sensory overload – anxiety, sweaty palms, short temper, shame, substance abuse. Fear holds us hostage, tense, hands clasped around our heads.

And then there's Moses – a Hebrew adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter as prince of Egypt. On the lam for murder he's called by God. He is God's messenger and prophet to get Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go, and God does it! But oh, the **frustration** overload. Frustration with the grumbling – they didn't like the food, or the water... eventually they even turned on God. Moses' frustrations came out in a variety of ways – frustration in words: complaining to his father-in-law about the people, complaint to God in the tent of meeting. Frustration with idolatry: Moses smashes the tablets on which the Commandments were inscribed by God's hand atop Mount Sinai. Frustration over whining: Moses strikes a rock when God had commanded him to only speak to make water come forth. Moses' ultimate frustration however is that God would only use him to go so far – Moses would not be the one to lead the people into the Promised Land. He'd die in view of it but wouldn't make it to enjoy the promise personally.

How often our frustrations lead us to poor decisions – decisions that carry consequences. Our undealt with frustrations fester – we build up resentments. We lash out in anger. We become contemptuous. We may even, in righteous indignation take the Word God has given us and weaponize it, use it against others to lash out rather than bear patiently and in measured tones in love. Are you on overload?

Yet I wonder what Moses thought, standing there on that mountain, standing there, 1,400 years after his death, standing there, talking to the Messiah.

And Elijah is there, too. Elijah was a prophet in the 800s BC. While the economic and military indicators were good, not all was well in Israel. King Ahab has it out for Elijah. His Queen, Jezebel had influenced the king to support the pagan religion of the Canaanites. Prophets of the false god Baal were openly, widely worshipped and Elijah stood up against this.

God thoroughly destroys the prophets of Baal and Elijah is on the lam. Fleeing for his life, he wishes he would just die, but God still has more things for him to do. It requires God's direct intervention to help Elijah stay and fight another day – to anoint new kings for Aram and Samaria, a new prophet to succeed him. It takes God protecting him from a new king and an advancing company of soldiers.

Flee and fight, flee and fight – this is Elijah's lot in life. If you've ever felt like you're spinning plates to keep things going, fending off attacks, rushing off to the next thing, running away from danger, only to have to reengage the danger again... that fight/flight response is exhausting. Which, of course, is exactly what our spiritual enemies the devil, world and even our own flesh wants. Fight and flight preserves us in the short term and wears us out over the long haul. This danger arousal can even make us sick. It can lead to depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, anger issues and a dry spiritual life. It contributes to a sense of alienation as well as separation from God. Even when God intervenes miraculously and hardships keep coming our way, what's the end game? What's the answer? When will the craziness just stop? Elijah, too was on overload.

And yet, here's Elijah, too, on this mountain. Elijah, taken up so long ago in a fiery chariot, standing, speaking in the light of Jesus.

This is why Jesus has come. He comes for the interrupting, impatient, fear-filled disciples, for the frustrated meeting complaints, roadblocks and discouragement, and those wearied by fight and flight from enemies outside and the enemy within. Jesus restores us. Jesus invites us into conversation. Jesus sheds His light into the dark corners of our lives. Jesus makes us **free!**

For the disciples, it's a gentle touch, gentle word, gentle gaze. For Moses, a conversation – Matthew doesn't tell us what they talked about but Luke tells us it's about what Jesus was going to do in Jerusalem. All the frustration and unrealized potential of the people of Israel would be undone in a new sacrifice, the one the Passover sacrifice was meant to point toward all those years before. All that frustration was not for naught! For Elijah, the fight will be won, the enemy vanquished, and the deliverance he received would be available to all people.

Your fears, frustrations and fights and flight are also covered by Jesus, with the seal of the Father's promise – He's pleased with Jesus! Listen to Him! He does it right. He carries the load. And when you have these God encounters, like at this altar there's Jesus. Gentle Jesus. With a touch, a taste. The gentle words "for you." The gentle coursing waters, adopting us as sons and daughters of God. Through Jesus, that thunderous voice of God is well-pleased – with you! With me!

Are you on overload? He wins you freedom to walk into your fearful places, frustrated places and fighting places armed with the light of His truth and His word. The Word spoken this very moment is a gentle touch from Jesus to set us free from fear! Free from frustrations! Free from the wearying fight and flight cycle! Jesus puts fear, frustration and fight/flee on overload! Jesus sets us free! In Jesus' name, Amen.