

Sermon presented on
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Broadway United Church of Christ, New York City

by the Rev. JOHN H. THOMAS,
President and General Minister of the United Church of Christ

“GET UP AND DO NOT BE AFRAID”

(Matthew 17:1-9)

This year Super Bowl Sunday is followed in quick succession by Super Tuesday and then by Ash Wednesday. A football extravaganza and a political extravaganza, both followed by the doorway into the church's purple, penitential season. New Yorkers will have the chance to be intimately involved in each of these events, all of them involving their own form of religious fervor; I won't embarrass you by taking a poll as to whether you've opted for only two of the three and, if so, which two! By Wednesday we may all be ready for sack cloth and ashes to cope with the excess of our parties, that is parties in both senses of the word.

“Change!” may have become the banner for the political campaigns this primary season. But it seems to me that the clear subtext for Super Tuesday is something quite different and far more unsettling. Beneath the thin veneer of optimism, opportunity, and hope, many of the candidates are trading on fear. Global terror, personified as Al Qaeda and its next plot or Ahmadinejad and his nuclear program, is the poster child for this, with the war in Iraq its principal beneficiary. Listen to a campaign commercial from Mitt Romney: “It's this century's nightmare – Jihadism. Violent, radical Islamic fundamentalism. Their goal is to unite the world under a single caliphate. To do that they must collapse freedom-loving nations like us.” Since September 11, 2001, fear has been the primary motivation and justification for much of the dark agenda carried out in our name.

Fear of immigrants, fear of the foreign born, fear of the undocumented, fear of the non-English speaking drives other agendas. “They'll take your jobs, smuggle in bombs, alter the face of the America we've known and loved, and overburden our social welfare network.” Or so we're told. There's the fear of losing ground economically, of losing our job, losing our health insurance, losing our home, losing our grip on life in the comfortable middle class, and if the fear is not about us, it may be for our children. While it's not been a prominent theme to this point in the current primaries, I fully expect fear mongering over the so-called “gay agenda” to reemerge at some point in this campaign as it has in the past. And, truth be told, for many there is the fear of a president being elected who will end the domination of white male privilege in the Oval Office. Our candidates or their surrogates are persistent purveyors of fear and we are easily manipulated, bent over by the lurking dread of insecurity.

But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” It’s not that Peter, James and John didn’t face real threats. Our text begins, “Six days later,” six days after had told them hard news: He would be going to Jerusalem, undergoing great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed. I suspect Peter and the others had a hard time hearing about resurrection in the wake of suffering and death, particularly when Jesus follows this prediction with the admonition to his followers to “deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it.”

No, it’s not that the disciples didn’t have real reason to fear. The empire of their day was ruthless in defending its privilege, its place, its power. Crucifixion, the method of torture in their day, was not to be taken lightly. And our fears are not without foundation either. But Super Tuesday and Ash Wednesday take radically different approaches to that fear. One is enamored with weapons and the apparatus of war. One is fascinated with walls and protected borders. One is convinced that preserving and accumulating wealth is the best hedge against insecurity. In each we seek to save our lives in a world that seems bent on taking them. The logic is hard to deny. Except that weapons and walls and wealth have never proven to be a lasting path toward security. They are the fare of the frightened; they more we rely on them, the more frightened we ultimately become.

Jesus tells us instead that we gain our lives by losing them. “Get up and do not be afraid.” Faith proposes a different source of security than weapons, walls, or wealth. Even in the most desperate of times, we discover life by letting go of our frightened grasping at life, allowing ourselves to be held by the source of life. Bob Moss was the second president of the United Church of Christ, much beloved, deeply respected. But tragically in the midst of his presidency he was diagnosed with cancer and left with a devastating prognosis. His pastor once described to me his first visit to Bob the day he learned that he would soon die. Jim walked into the hospital room where grief and fear hung heavy in the air. Instead of an embrace, Jim held up a copy of the Heidelberg Catechism, the faith primer of the German Reformed Church that was the tradition of Bob’s baptism. Jim looked Bob in the eye and asked him the first question: “Robert, what is your only comfort in life and in death.” To which Bob replied, “That I belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to myself but to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.” Get up and do not be afraid.

Each year we read the story of the Transfiguration the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. It’s a puzzling story filled with mysterious elements. A vision of a transfigured Jesus offers a glimpse of glory, but it’s temporary, and its meaning uncertain. Moses and Elijah seem to imply continuity with the past, and perhaps a reference to resurrection and the tradition that neither Moses nor Elijah died but were taken up directly to heaven. The building of dwellings seems an odd response, perhaps one of those “don’t just stand there, do something!” reactions. All of these elements pique our curiosity. But the focus remains on what is clear and cannot be denied, on the word spoken, the touch given, and the command offered. “This is my

Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased.” The words echo what was heard at Jesus’ baptism, a reminder that the one to whom we belong in faith himself belongs to God. My Son. My beloved. And, in the midst of fear, a touch, and an encouragement: “Get up and do not be afraid.” Transfiguration offers a powerful counter-voice to the fear on so many lips and insecurity in so many hearts as we prepare for Super Tuesday. You belong to the One who belongs to God, who is God’s beloved. Get up and do not be afraid.

A few years ago during a trip to Lebanon I visited the refugee camps in south Beirut where, for several generations, Palestinian refugees have been forced to live, unable to return to their ancestral villages in Israel, unwanted elsewhere in Lebanon. The teeming slums were at that time under the control of the Lebanese police, the Syrian army, and Hezbollah’s militias. It’s a place of rage and despair. We were visiting service projects supported by the United Church of Christ that are run by the Middle East Council of Churches. During our visit to Lebanon we had been accompanied by three burly armed guards from the Presidential security service. I wasn’t sure what that was all about but it was not a very comforting experience. When we got to the refugee camps, however, I found their presence reassuring.

But just as we were prepared to enter the camps, an animated debate erupted between our guards and our guide for the morning, a 75 year old retired professor from the American University in Beirut. Sylvia Haddad now serves as a volunteer for the Middle East Council of Churches and she was telling the guards that they couldn’t accompany us. After much cell phone consultation, they sullenly stepped aside. “OK, I thought, wouldn’t this be the one place where having them would be a good idea?” “No,” Sylvia replied. “If we go in with guards and weapons, the people will be suspicious and it won’t be safe. But the people know me. They know the Middle East Council of Churches. They know we are friends. With me, you’ll be safe.” So we marched into this cauldron of despair, anger, and violence, armed not with weapons, but with love.”

Get up and do not be afraid. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman tells us that “it is the prophetic vocation of the church to keep alive the ministry of imagination, conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the one the King with all his royal politics would have us believe is the only one possible.” The bright imagination of Transfiguration offers such an alternative to the dark imagination of Super Tuesday and its priests of anxiety, insecurity, and fear. Such an imagination may not become the basis for our nation’s foreign and military policy any time soon, or end the yearning for walls, or completely free us from the idols of consumption. But it might just mean that we would take up arms with less enthusiasm, less certainty, and far more sorrow. It might mean that we would at least acknowledge the ultimate foolishness of walls, knowing that, in the words of one thoughtful politician, “for every fifty foot wall there is a fifty-one foot ladder.” It might mean that we would hold our wealth with open rather than clutching hands and spirits, ready to share with the poor without a paralyzing fear that we will be diminished in the giving. Yes, the bright imagination of Transfiguration tells us that in the face of

all that threatens our lives, our only comfort, our only security, is that we belong body and soul, in life and in death to our Savior Jesus Christ, and that the one to whom we belong is none other than God's Son, God's beloved.

Weapons, walls, and the grasping after wealth are each the implements of fear and the royal imagination that trades in them. This day, Tuesday, and in the purple season ahead, hear a new voice, conjuring a new future: "Get up and do not be afraid." Oh yes, and go Giants!