

The Church of the Transfiguration
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
Mark 9:30-37

Embracing Our Desires

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Last Saturday night, Michael and I attended a performance of the Verdi *Requiem* at the Metropolitan Opera. The concert was the first performance in the opera house since it was shut down as a result of the pandemic in March 2020 – some 18 months ago. The concert also commemorated the 20th anniversary of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center.

I've seen the *Requiem* performed many times before. It's one of my all-time favorite musical works. I've even sung it as a member of a community chorus. But I never quite experienced the *Requiem* like I did last Saturday.

Maybe it was the fact that the twin themes of COVID-19 and 9-11 loomed large over everything that night. Maybe it was the fact that we were double-masked and surrounded by some 3,500 strangers inside a building for the first time in a year and a half.

But there was a raw, primal fear in the music that I had never noticed before. Take the opening words of the “Dies Irae”:

*Dies irae, dies illa,
solvet saeculum in favilla.*

That is:

Day of wrath – on that day
the world will be dissolved into ashes.

Hearing those words made me think of the ashes that fell like snow from the twin towers on that clear September morning two decades ago. Those words also brought to mind all of the crematoria and burning funeral pyres around the world as the Delta variant has spiraled out of control.

To be sure, there were moments of great joy and hope during last Saturday night's concert. But the concert was a solemn reminder of the fear that so many of us have been living under for a very long time.

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We don't often think about it, but fear is a central theme in the gospels.

The gospel narrative begins with many individuals who are described as being fearful: Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, and the shepherds. Later in the gospels, Jesus' disciples experience all kinds of fear, whether it's during a storm on the sea, or at the Transfiguration. Peter is so fearful that he denies Jesus three times.

Fear shows up in today's gospel passage as well.

Our text begins with Jesus teaching the disciples about his impending death and resurrection. He tells them that the Son of Man will be betrayed and killed, but that he will rise again in three days.

The disciples do not understand what Jesus is saying. But they are too afraid to ask him to explain what he means. And so they end up arguing among themselves about who is the greatest.

(The Greek word used by Mark to describe the disciples' fear is "*e-pho-boún-to*," which is where we get the word "phobia" from.)

So why were the disciples afraid? Biblical scholars have proposed a number of theories.

One theory is that the disciples were afraid of facing the harsh truth about Jesus' upcoming passion and crucifixion. Deep down inside, they had a sense about how bad things could get, and so they chose to avoid the issue.

A second theory is that the disciples were afraid that Jesus would rebuke them if they asked too many questions. This is not surprising since Jesus had recently just told Peter to "Get behind me, Satan!" – which we heard in last week's gospel reading. So the disciples kept their mouths shut.

A third theory – which I personally like – is that the disciples were afraid that they would look foolish in front of their peers by asking too many questions. How often have we been in situations – either in the classroom or at work – when we didn't quite understand what was going on, and yet we were too afraid to speak up? And so it's completely understandable why the disciples decided to change the subject.

Regardless of which of these theories makes the most sense to you, it's clear that the disciples were paralyzed by their fear. Fear prevented them from asking Jesus about what they really wanted to know.

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How has fear affected your spiritual life?

Have you ever been too afraid to ask God for what you really wanted? Have you ever desired something deeply, but you were too afraid to share it with God in prayer?

Perhaps, like the disciples, you were afraid of facing your desires. Maybe, deep down inside, you understood the challenges or difficulties of what you were asking for, and so you decided not to go there.

Or perhaps you were afraid that God would rebuke you harshly if you dared to ask for what you really wanted.

Or perhaps you were afraid that you would look foolish for expressing your desires to God.

Some of you know that I grew up in the Roman Catholic Church. I felt a calling to the priesthood at a young age. But when I realized during my adolescence that I was gay, I thought that such a vocation would never be a possibility.

It took me literally decades – and a ton of spiritual direction – before I got over my fear and worked up the courage to ask God if I might be called to ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church.

Jesus teaches us to be courageous in praying for what we want. A few chapters later in Mark’s gospel, Jesus says “[W]hatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (Mark 11:24).

To be sure, God is not some cosmic slot machine that rewards us whenever we happen to hit the prayer jackpot. Just because we pray for something, it doesn’t mean that God will answer our prayers in precisely the same way in which we think they should be answered. My priesthood looks very different than what I imagined it to be like as a child. And yet it is exactly what God is calling me to do.

Jesus promises us that God will hear our prayers. But we will never know what God wants for us unless we have the courage to ask for what we desire in the first place.

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It’s been heartening over the past few weeks to see things slowly returning to normal in midtown Manhattan. Students are going back to school, and office buildings are reopening.

But we’re not quite out of the woods yet. Vaccination rates aren’t nearly as high as they should be. National security threats, both foreign and domestic, occur on a daily basis. And our nation remains deeply divided along political, geographical, and racial lines.

But to be a follower of Jesus is to believe that death is never the last word. To be a Christian is to proclaim that love is always stronger than hate, and that hope is always stronger than despair.

And to be a Christian is to recognize that we are called to be courageous and to follow the divine command to “fear not.”

There is an amazing line in the Verdi *Requiem* in which the mezzo-soprano begs Jesus for mercy. In her prayer, she audaciously reminds him that *she* herself is the reason for the incarnation and the atonement:

*Recordare, Jesu pie,
quod sum causa tua viae:
ne me perdas illa die.*

That is,

Remember, merciful Jesus,
that I am the reason for your journey:
do not lose me on that day.

Yes, as mind-blowing as it sounds, the mezzo-soprano is the very reason why Jesus became human and died on the cross. And you are the very reason for Jesus’ journey as well. As am I.

In light of this, how can any of us be afraid to ask God for what we want? How can a God who emptied himself on the cross for our sake be anything but open to embracing our desires?

So fear not. And be not afraid to ask God for your deepest desires. Because God is listening.