

Defending God from Other People

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:

Matthew 16:21–17:9

It is Transfiguration Sunday, this Sunday, and we've read the traditional lectionary reading for the transfiguration. But I decided to add a little bit to the beginning of the reading. I extended the reading backwards into the text. These two readings are not usually read together. They're usually separated. First, you get Peter's denial of the crucifixion and Jesus' rebuke of Peter and his prophecy of the crucifixion. And then months and months later, in a different season, you get the story of the transfiguration. And I think to understand the transfiguration you need to put these two readings together. You begin to see that the transfiguration is a response to what came directly before it when you read it all as one piece of text. There's a reason that the transfiguration is the thing that follows Jesus' first prediction of his crucifixion. You begin to see that the transfiguration is an answer to a question. And that question (Peter's question) is this: Shouldn't I, Peter, shouldn't we as Christians followers, shouldn't we defend the faith? Shouldn't I protect the holy? Shouldn't I stand up for Jesus?

I think that's all that Peter wants to do. Beneath those questions, beneath Peter's desire, is an assumption, a worldview. And that assumption is this: that God needs to be protected from the bad things in this world and the bad people in this world. I'll tell you a little bit of a story to explain sometimes how this shows itself in everyday life. I had a good friend who was a counselor and a director at an institution for extraordinarily troubled young girls, teens and young girls. It was a very difficult job, very emotionally demanding. These girls had been institutionalized sometimes by the state, sometimes by their families because they were out of control or traumatized in some way. And there was one particular girl whose story was beyond the average person's ability to comprehend. It was almost unimaginable what had happened and been done to this child. It was the sort of thing—I'm not going to go into the details because that will just distract us—but it's the sort of thing that makes national news, the sort of thing where a child is found after years of neglect in a basement somewhere and is not what they should be anymore because of how they've been treated.

And the suffering that this child went through was very difficult on my friend. She was struggling to understand it and she was telling a small group of close friends about what this child had been through and how this child was healing, but would maybe never fully heal. And one of the people who she was telling the story to was a young woman. She was in her early twenties. She was a southern belle of sorts. She was a Christian from a very evangelical Christian background. And my opinion of her before this conversation happened was that she was a little bit socially and spiritually naïve. But as my friend was explaining to us what had happened to this child, this young woman stopped the conversation and she said, no, no, no, no, no, no. I do not believe it! I cannot believe that God would ever let that happen to a child.

Now in that statement, we begin to see this tendency that we all experience to some extent. The statement, "I do not believe that God would ever let that happen to a child," was not entirely a defense of that child. It was a defense of what this young woman thought about God, her worldview of God, who God is and what God does. And she could not live in a world where God allowed such things to happen and she could not believe in a God who allowed such things to happen. So her resistance to the truth of the story that my friend was telling was not for the sake of the child alone. It was to protect God. And ultimately it was to protect her own comfort and worldview about who God was.

Peter is struggling with the same exact thing at the beginning of our reading, the same exact thing. Here comes Jesus, the perfect encapsulation of who God is going to be in the world: the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, God's own self come into the world. And Jesus says, I'm going to be turned over to worldly authorities, I'm going to be tortured and killed and crucified. And Peter says, "Oh no, you're not! No way, not on my watch!" In part, it's because Jesus is his friend, and he doesn't want it to happen to Jesus. But that's not all it is. It's an inability to believe that this prophecy could be God's way, the way of the cross, the way of sacrifice, the way of suffering. In inability to believe that this would even be allowed, let alone necessary. The idea that God's ultimate act is going to be one of suffering and sacrifice, that's what Peter can't accept. Peter can't accept that if he's going to be a

follower of Jesus, he's going to have to accept that his understanding of God is wrong. Jesus's response to Peter is initially a little bit like my response to this young woman when I heard her say, I can't believe that this is a true story because God would never let that happen. I had to kind of bite my tongue to stop from laughing out loud and to then just sort of criticize her because it makes me angry that sometimes that people who believe these things are also people in leadership in churches who make rules about what is and isn't allowed in church. And they begin to defend the faith to protect the holy and to stand up for Jesus, which is not always a bad thing, but it can be a bad thing when you do it with the wrong assumptions about what it is that needs defending and what doesn't need defending. Does God need defending from the world or not? Or is God calling us not to defend the faith, but to take up our cross? It's a very different, very different way of being a person of faith. Am I going to defend the faith or am I going to take up my cross and follow Jesus? Those two things feel like very different ways of being Christian to me.

So, now we have to ask: Why does Jesus bring Peter up the mountain for the transfiguration after his big mistake? Well, after that first, rather mean rebuke, Jesus realizes that he needs to try a different way and be a little bit nicer. As I was lying in bed that night after this incident with my friend's story, I realized that part of the reason I was so angry at this young woman is because she reflected a part of me that I was angry with, right? That in fact, we all feel this way. We all feel like we need to defend God from the bad things in the world. We all feel like we want to defend our worldview. And we all want to cling to the comfort that God won't let anything too terrible happen to us or to any of the other good people in the world. And I realized that the reason I was so mad at her is because she was reflecting something inside of me and a tendency inside of all of us.

So Jesus decides he's going to try a different way, a kinder way. He gives Peter more holiness than Peter has ever dreamed of. I mean, this is what Peter really wants—to be up there on the top of the mountain! And Jesus is shining with glory and he's holy and uplifted. And it is happening in a way that no one can deny it and no one can ever touch it or ruin it or deny it or disrespect it. And it's a beautiful scene. And Peter says, oh, if only I could build you a shelter up here, Lord, and we could just stay up here forever! You and me, Moses, Elijah, we'll never have to go back down the mountain and face those terrible things that you had talked about.

But God adds one additional piece to this mystical experience of holiness: a very practical piece of advice. "This is my son. Listen to him." That's the most important part of the entire experience—that closing line. "Listen to him." In other words, there is another way, beyond your imagining, and Jesus is showing you what that way is. It is risky, it is messy, it is a way of sacrifice and loss, but it is the highest way of being. If you try to defend him from it, me from it, yourself from, you will never experience what it can do. So, it's time for you to walk back down this mountain, and when you do, know that you are going to follow that way, and you're going to listen to him.

The question for us now is what's the point of our religion? As we head back down the mountain, what

is the way that we follow? Is the point of religion to save ourselves, to get our own way and to win at life? Or is the point of our religion to serve and save others, to give our best to the world, and ultimately to sacrifice everything for what we believe is most important? You cannot protect yourself, you cannot protect your worldview, and you cannot protect God if your call from Jesus Christ is to pick up your cross and to follow him. They don't go together. You cannot have your way and the way of the cross. You can't save yourself and lose yourself for Jesus' sake. Our calling is the way of the cross. We can't protect Jesus if who Jesus is is someone who has rejected protection—rejected it in order to serve and save the world. And if we believe that God needs to be protected from evil, then we cannot possibly believe that God is greater than evil.

How do we apply this to our own lives and our own spiritual journeys? I think gently and slowly. It is a very difficult teaching, the way of the cross—that we are called to sacrifice our way for the best of others. And I think it is best to practice it in small doses and just to be aware of when we are trying to protect God for our own sakes, even though we believe it's maybe for God's sake. The way that we do this sometimes in church is we get very concerned about the way that the church is going to interact with the outside community. Who do we want to come in and who do we want to be represented here? What sort of events are appropriate or inappropriate for church? You know, these kinds of questions where we begin to think about appropriate and inappropriate. Is it appropriate to rent the church for a wedding or do we need to protect God from wedding rentals? These kinds of questions indicate we are thinking of values, which is good, but that we're missing the biggest value of all—we're here to serve a God who isn't afraid of anything.

So, what do we need to protect God from? The reality is that we don't need to protect God from anything! So, we're free instead to open the doors wide and to call people into relationship with God. And we can trust that God (who we believe literally died for these all these people) can handle whatever else they're going to bring with them. And the good news for all of us who sometimes feel like Peter felt is that means that God can handle anything that we bring to God. God can handle our pasts, our struggles, our mistakes. God can take us to the mountaintop and show us the way because God is the one who is protecting us.