

Take a Breath
[Matthew 17:1-9](#)
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Sometimes we try to watch a movie together as a family, but it isn't easy, because Calvin and Lewis are four years apart, and it's hard to find a movie they will both enjoy. Even movies that we think will be pretty gentle, Lewis finds scary – we tried watching the Lion King, and every time the hyenas showed up on screen, Lewis would kind of curl in on himself so that he couldn't see the screen. It didn't matter if we explained to him that the hyenas aren't real, they're just cartoons – they felt real to him. So we've learned that the best way to handle this is to let Lewis watch the fun parts of the movie – like Timon and Pumbaa eating bugs – and then whenever he starts getting scared, one of us will just take him into the other room for a short break. We'll play a game or read a book for a few minutes until the scary part has passed, and then we can rejoin the rest of the family to finish the movie – at least until the hyenas come back. When he's scared, it helps for Lewis to experience the real world – the world outside the TV – and to remember that the hyenas go away if you just turn them off and walk away. Sometimes you need a break from drama and danger. Sometimes you need an opportunity to take a deep breath and remember what's truly real.

And I think that's the same message we can learn from the story we read today on Transfiguration Sunday. All the way through the gospel of Matthew, Jesus and his disciples have been in constant conflict with the

world around them. As Jesus teaches and preaches, the powerful people in their world – the Romans, Herod, the religious authorities in Jerusalem, the local scribes and Pharisees – they are all watching every move Jesus makes, waiting for him to make a mistake, trying to trip him up and bring him down. Most of Jesus' sermons in Matthew include warnings about persecution and conflict, pronouncements of woe and judgment on the unrighteous and rebellious, and most of his parables end with somebody getting cast out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth – Matthew does not sugar coat how difficult a life following Jesus will be. At every step of their journey, Jesus and his disciples have been confronting injustice and cruelty and fear with wisdom and truth and love, but it sure feels like for every follower, they gain five enemies. By the time we reach today's story, the conflict has reached new heights – just before this reading, Jesus takes his disciples aside and explains to them that he is going to Jerusalem to die – that he will suffer and be killed, and then on the third day be raised to life. And when Peter completely rejects this idea – Never, Lord – this shall never happen to you! – Jesus condemns Peter. He tells Peter, his most passionate, most loyal follower, Get behind me, Satan; you are a stumbling block to me. From the moment they started following Jesus, the disciples have been hounded by trouble and misery and opposition, and now that trouble is right there in the open, between Jesus and Peter.

And it's not like that trouble is going away. After today's reading, Jesus heads towards Jerusalem, towards the cross – after today, every moment, every step leads closer and closer towards his death. Today is the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent, today is the last day before we begin our journey of repentance, following Jesus towards the cross and the tomb. So put yourself in the disciples shoes here – ever since they started following Jesus, they have been surrounded by trouble, opposition, conflict, and we know that is not going to change anytime soon. If they look at the road behind them, if they look at the road ahead, all they can see is pain. There are hyenas behind them and in front of them and everywhere they look.

And that's why Jesus chooses this moment, immediately after his confrontation with Peter, immediately before the journey to Jerusalem begins, Jesus decides to take his three closest disciples, Peter, James and John, up the mountain alone. And there on the mountain, the disciples are given an incredible vision. There on the mountain, they see Jesus in an entirely new way. He is transfigured, transformed, his face shines like the sun, his clothes become as white as light, he is surrounded by the greatest heroes of the faith, Moses and Elijah alive, walking and talking with Jesus. And over and around them, the cloud of God's presence, the same cloud that guided the people of Israel through the wilderness, God's presence descends on them and covers them, and God's voice speaks from the cloud and tells them, This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

Listen to him. In the middle of this difficult, miserable journey, in the middle of all this trouble and conflict, Jesus gives his disciples an opportunity to take a breath, take a break, to lift up their eyes from the brokenness they see around them and see a completely different world, a vision of the kingdom of heaven. All the way through the gospel of Matthew, Jesus has been teaching and preaching about the kingdom of heaven, but now that kingdom is here, it's visible, it's right there in front of them. They can see God's glory and power, they can see Jesus as he truly is, clothed in light, they can see the everlasting life given to those who follow God and speak God's word. And when you can see the kingdom of heaven, then you realize that this world, the broken world that the disciples have been trudging their way through all this time, this isn't the real world. This isn't the way things were meant to be, this isn't the way things are always going to be. All the trouble, all the pain, all the hyenas on the road ahead and behind, they are not going to win. The kingdom of heaven is more real than all the brokenness, all the pain, all the powers of sin and hell do not hold a candle to the power of the kingdom of heaven, and that kingdom is coming here. God's kingdom is coming to break down all the powers of sin and pain and death and establish justice and mercy and love for all creation, once and for all. And while the road to that victory will still be difficult, still lined with challenge and conflict and pain, here on the mountain Jesus gives his disciples a glimpse of what is coming, what is inevitable, what cannot be stopped. To help them endure the road ahead, Jesus gives his disciples a

break, he allows them to take a breath of fresh air from the kingdom, he gives them a foretaste of the glory they will one day enjoy for all eternity. When it feels like pain and trouble are all around, Jesus shows his disciples what is truly real, what will last forever, what will never pass away.

And that is still important for us to hear, here in this world, here on our journey through this life. We still live in a world filled with trouble and pain; we can still look at the road ahead, and the road behind, and see all the obstacles in our path, all the hyenas lurking in the dark. We know exactly how broken our world is. We see it every day, in far away places on the other side of the world, and right here, in our own province, our own cities, our own families, our own hearts. And it is so easy to think that all of this pain and brokenness is just the way things are, the only way they can ever be, that this is the real world, and we just have to get used to it. And in those moments of despair, our God still calls to us, calls us to follow Jesus Christ up the mountain, calls us to lift our eyes up from the darkness and trouble of this world and catch a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. Open our eyes to see the real world, the world where Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death on the cross, the world where the grave has been defeated, once and for all. That world is still coming, and if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we will witness that coming kingdom. We will catch a glimpse of the light of Christ, shining in the darkness. We will be given a breath of the wind of the Spirit, whispering in the night. In the Lord of the Rings, JRR Tolkien told the story of two heroes who undertake an almost impossible

quest, travelling across a ruined landscape filled with misery and pain and death, and when they are almost ready to give up in despair, Tolkien wrote that “There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end, the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.” When we are surrounded by darkness, God sends us his light so that we can see what is truly real, so that our world and our hearts can be transfigured and transformed. Even in the darkest moments, we are never out of reach of God’s light.

And when we remember that – when we remember that God’s light is still shining, that the darkness cannot overcome it – and when we remember that his light is shining in us through the power of his holy Spirit, that in Christ we are the light of the world, then we can go out into this world and shine so that those who are living in darkness can see God’s light in us. We can be signs of God’s coming kingdom. We can remind the world of what is truly real, what is passing away and what will last forever. In how we serve, in how we pray, in how we forgive, in how we love, we can bring hope to this broken world. We can shine in the darkness, so that the world will hear God’s voice and see God’s light and come to know God’s son alive in us. Today, may we lift up our eyes and see the salvation of our God. Today,

may that salvation live in us, so the light of Christ will shine in the darkness, everywhere we go. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen.