

February 23, 2020
“Get Up, Stand Up”
Exodus 24:12-18 & Matthew 17:1-9
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

The book of Ecclesiastes suggests that there's a time for every season, a time for every matter under heaven—acknowledging the range of human experience and human realities, for better and for worse. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted. A time to weep, and a time to laugh. A time to mourn, and a time to dance.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration might put it this way: There is a time to rest, and a time to act. A time to lie down, and a time to get up. A time to go up the mountain, and a time to come down.

Cord reminded us last week about what turned out to be Martin Luther King's final speech, his famous “Mountaintop” speech delivered on April 3, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, at the Mason Temple Church of God in Christ. The night before he was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

This being Black History Month, I'm gonna do something a little different this morning and share a little Black history—an American history—lesson.

As you may know, Dr. King was back in town again, along with his colleagues from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), in support of and in solidarity with striking sanitation workers in Memphis. He saw their campaign as key to the national Poor People's Campaign, which SCLC had launched in the fall to draw increasing attention to the need for economic, and not just racial, justice. For human, not just civil, rights.

On February 1, 1968, a day marked by torrential rain, flooded streets, and overflowing sewers in Memphis, two black sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker—forced to work in spite of the weather—took refuge from the rain in the back of the garbage truck. An electrical switch malfunctioned, the compactor turned on, and they were both crushed to death.

The City refused to even compensate the families.

Ten days later, in response to that horrific incident and a much longer pattern of the City's blatantly racist disregard for its black employees, more than 1,000 black men from the Memphis Department of Public Works voted to go on strike again (they had tried and failed two years earlier, but didn't have enough community support) to protest filthy and unsafe working conditions, long hours and low wages with no overtime pay and no paid sick leave. Missing a day or getting injured on the job could get you fired.

On Valentine's Day, 1968, Mayor Henry Loeb, newly elected the month before, issued an ultimatum and demanded that the men return to work by the next morning. Some did, under police escort, but most did not. And the garbage continued to pile up.

Rev. James Lawson, King's longtime friend and ally, a key resource in King's understanding and embrace of nonviolence as a strategy for social change (and I might add, a Methodist minister), said at a news conference: "When a public official orders a group of men to 'get back to work and then we'll talk' and treats them as though they are not men, that is a racist point of view. And no matter how you dress it up in terms of whether or not a union can organize it, it is still racism. At the heart of racism is the idea 'A man is not a man.'" You likely recognize the signs, signs that have been used more recently in protests from Ferguson to the Arab Spring.

A February 18th all-night sit-in at City Hall successfully pressured City Council, on February 22nd, to recognize the union and recommend a wage increase, but Loeb refused.

The next day, 52 years ago today, after Memphis police unleashed mace and tear gas against a group of nonviolent demonstrators, Memphis' black community rallied together. They formed the group, COME (Community on the Move for Equality), led by Jim Lawson.

By March there were daily—DAILY!—marches from Clayborn Temple, an African Methodist Episcopal Church near Beale Street, to Memphis City Hall, with local high school and college students (including both black and white students) joining alongside the sanitation workers.

King showed up for the first time on March 18th, addressing a crowd of at least 15,000—and other accounts suggest it was as high as 25,000. When I was a campus minister at Drexel, I took students to visit that church during an alternative spring break trip to

Memphis focused on civil rights past and present, and I can tell you that it is huge—but it officially seats only 7,500. You get the picture. At the time it was said to be the largest indoor gathering the civil rights movement had ever seen.

“You are demonstrating that we can stick together,” he said. “You are demonstrating that we are all tied in a single garment of destiny, and that if one black person suffers, if one black person is down, we are all down.”

“So we assemble here tonight . . . to say, ‘We are tired. We are tired of being at the bottom. We are tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. We are tired of our children having to attend overcrowded, inferior, quality-less schools. We are tired of having to live in dilapidated, substandard housing conditions where we don't have wall-to-wall carpet, but so often end up with wall-to-wall rats and roaches. We are tired . . . smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society. We are tired of walking the streets in search for jobs that do not exist. We are tired of working our hands off and laboring every day and not even making a wage adequate with the daily basic necessities of life . . . We are tired.’”

They called for a citywide work stoppage, and King planned to return on March 22nd. When the day arrived an historic snowstorm hit the region, preventing King from reaching Memphis and causing organizers to reschedule for March 28.

The crowd gathered in front of Clayborn Temple that morning was at least 15,000 strong—and some estimates indicate that more than 20,000 students skipped school to participate. Early into the march, things started to get out of hand and it was quickly called off as violence began to erupt. King was escorted to his hotel and Lawson pleaded with people to go back to the church. In the ensuing chaos there was looting, and a 16-year-old boy, Larry Payne, was shot and killed. Police followed demonstrators back to the church and released tear gas inside the sanctuary, clubbing people as they lay on the floor to get fresh air. There were reports of injured protestors breaking through the stained glass to get out of the church.

Loeb declared martial law and called in National Guard troops, and the following day, more than 200 workers continued their daily march, carrying those same signs. King

returned to Memphis on April 3rd to support the ongoing campaign. Word was out about death threats against him. There was another major rainstorm looming, and he was not feeling well that night, so he had not planned to attend the evening rally. His colleague and close friend, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, went in his place, but after warming up the crowd, he decided that King needed to be there so he called the hotel and sent for him.

With no notes, and visibly weary, King started by thanking people for braving the storm. He recalled pivotal moments in human history and in the black freedom struggle itself. If you haven't read or heard the speech before, I encourage you to. But I share a few highlights now, to continue our history lesson.

"I remember in Birmingham, Alabama, when we were in that majestic struggle there we would move out of the 16th Street Baptist Church day after day; by the hundreds we would move out. And Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth and they did come; but we just went before the dogs singing, 'Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round.' Bull Connor next would say, "Turn the fire hoses on." And as I said to you the other night, Bull Connor didn't know history. He knew a kind of physics that somehow didn't relate to the trans-physics that we knew about. And that was the fact that there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. And we went before the fire hoses; we had known water. If we were Baptist or some other denomination, we had been immersed. If we were Methodist, and some others, we had been sprinkled, but we knew water.

"That couldn't stop us. And we just went on before the dogs and we would look at them; and we'd go on before the water hoses and we would look at it, and we'd just go on singing 'Over my head I see freedom in the air.' And then we would be thrown in the paddy wagons, and sometimes we were stacked in there like sardines in a can. And they would throw us in, and old Bull would say, 'Take them off,' and they did; and we would just go in the paddy wagon singing, 'We Shall Overcome.' And every now and then we'd get in the jail, and we'd see the jailers looking through the windows being moved by our prayers, and being moved by our words and our songs. And there was a power there which Bull Connor couldn't adjust to; and so we ended up transforming Bull into a steer, and we won our struggle in Birmingham. Now we've got to go on to Memphis just like that."

He went on: "It's all right to talk about 'long white robes over yonder,' in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's all right to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey,' but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preachers must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do."

And then he concluded, as is likely more familiar: "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

When he sat down, to thunderous applause, his colleagues said he had tears in his eyes. It was as if he was saying goodbye.

This is a story, a profound piece of black history, of our shared national history, about receiving a mountaintop vision, a divine vision of what the world could and should be, and bringing that high-altitude, love-filled vision back down the mountain to the valley, to the uneven ground, to the rough places, to do the work required to recreate such a world. In Isaiah's vision, a world where "every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."

Coming down the mountain into the brokenness of the real world, facing into all-too-real fear, even death. Dr. King, like Moses as we heard last week, would not make it to the promised land himself, but the movement kept on.

In fact, on April 8th, just four days after King was shot and killed and the day before he was buried, his widowed wife, Coretta, helped lead an estimated 42,000 people in a silent march through Memphis, demanding that Loeb give into the union's requests. He refused but a deal was finally reached on April 16th, recognizing the union and guaranteeing a better wage, though even then the union had to strike again three months later to force the City to follow through with its commitment.

The journey, the struggle, toward the promised land continued. The journey, the holy struggle, toward the promised land continues.

There is a time to go up the mountain, and a time to come down.

Throughout the Biblical account, the mountain represents a place set apart. A holy place. A place where God dwells. A place for encounter with God, where the vision for life is received and renewed.

It is on the mountain, Mt. Sinai, the mountain of God, where we find Moses in the reading from Exodus. Encountering God as devouring fire, burning bush. Receiving God's vision, the covenant expressed through the commandments and the law. He stayed for 40 days and 40 nights, which means, of course, that the Israelites also waited down below for 40 days and 40 nights.

There is a time to go up the mountain, friends. There is a time to wait for the vision to clarify.

It is on the mountain where we find Jesus again and again, retreating to be alone with God. Alone in prayer. Away from the crowds and the demands of his daily life. Modeling a pattern of balance and self-care, loving neighbor as you love yourself. There is a time to go up the mountain, friends. There is a time to rest, a time to lie down.

And it is on the mountain where we find Jesus with three of his select disciples, Peter and the brothers, James and John. As soon as they reach the top, up a "high mountain" we're told, Jesus is suddenly transfigured before them: his "face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." And just as suddenly, Moses and Elijah appear with him, and start talking.

We don't know what they say, but we know what Peter says to Jesus in response: "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Peter's ready to set up camp! Peter wants to stick around the mountaintop for awhile. If you've had mountaintop experiences, literally or figuratively, when you are or feel like you're on top of the world, you can relate to that instinct. Amen!

At the same time, the already spectacular scene gets even more spectacular. As with Moses on Mt. Sinai, a bright cloud overshadows them and from it, a voice, the voice of God: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased." Echoing Jesus' baptism. But this time, the voice continues: ". . . and listen to him!"

And upon hearing this, the disciples do what? The disciples, just a minute ago eager to pitch tents and stay awhile, fall to the ground, overcome by fear. But what are they afraid of?

We could certainly understand their being afraid in the midst of such a mystical, otherworldly experience, but they were not afraid (as far as we know) when Jesus is transfigured, or when Moses and Elijah appear out of nowhere. I'm pretty sure that's when my fear would've kicked in!

The text, translated, says they fell down in fear when they heard "this," suggesting that it was the message rather than the messenger that triggered their fear. And perhaps, more specifically, the last few words: ". . . listen to him!"

We recall, of course, that these are the same disciples who left fishing nets and family behind to follow Jesus. We know that by this time they have been through a lot with Jesus—sermons on other mountains, teachings and parables, one confrontation after another with the scribes and Pharisees, healing after healing after healing, miracles like the feeding of the 5,000. And oh, the crowds!

If they didn't know exactly what they were getting themselves into when they first encountered Jesus, when they dropped everything to follow him, they surely do now.

It's worth noting that just before this story of transfiguration, Jesus foretells his own death and resurrection with the disciples for the first time, raising the stakes even further. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

No doubt they were relieved to be invited up the mountain with Jesus, their own chance to rest their weary feet, to take a break from the crowds, away from the authorities who were growing increasingly agitated with Jesus. And so maybe they are afraid, in this moment, to come back down the mountain—back into the fray, back into what often feels like wilderness, back into the demands of discipleship—because they know that's where Jesus is headed. They know what listening to him—taking Jesus seriously—requires of them. What it will require of them.

These three disciples are afraid, and what does Jesus do? In this transcendental moment, in which he is the literal star of the show, in which his connection to the divine is on full, fantastic display, what does Jesus do?

Something profoundly human. He touches them. He touches them. This is such a small detail but it's so important to the story! Jesus, who is both a window to divinity and a mirror to humanity, touches them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." Get up and do not be afraid. And I imagine them getting up and coming down the mountain, which they do in the verses that follow, with not just Jesus, but their fear, transfigured.

"There is no fear in love," writes the author of the first letter of John, "but perfect love casts out fear . . ."

There are a lot of reasons why it's sometimes—or maybe often times—hard for us to get up and to not give up on the vision. To get up and go up the mountain when the rest and renewed vision is what we need. Or once on the mountain, with that renewed vision and energy, to get up and come back down to live more fully into the lives and toward the kind of world to which we are called, toward the love for which we are called. Love for ourselves, love for each other, love for the earth itself.

Maybe we don't get up, or we give up, or we give into death-dealing visions as we considered last week, because we feel too busy or stressed. Or we feel too overwhelmed by the weight, the brokenness, the cruelty of the world. Too tired, or too tired of waiting. Too hurt. Too depressed. Or grief-stricken. Or angry. Or cynical. Or distracted. Or indifferent. Or hopeless. And yes, maybe we are too afraid.

Too afraid of the unknown, the uncertainty, afraid that nothing's gonna change, like the Israelites waiting impatiently for Moses at the base of Mt. Sinai. Or too afraid of drawing attention to ourselves, of standing out. Too afraid to fail, or to acknowledge our past failures. Afraid to acknowledge our own ignorance or biases. Afraid to cross artificial social divisions or engage difference. Afraid of conflict. Afraid to confront pain we've experienced or pain we've caused. Afraid to get hurt, or get hurt again. Afraid to risk loss, or risk further loss. Afraid to risk vulnerability and truth. Afraid to be loved. Too afraid to go up the mountain, or too afraid to come down.

I have read that some variation of the assurance, "do not be afraid," appears in the Bible 365 times. If you're counting at home, that would be once for every day of the year. I don't know if it's true but I'd like to think that it is.

And 'do not be afraid' doesn't have to mean that we have no fear. Fear may be in the car, the trick is keeping it out of the driver's seat. Fear is real, but so is love. And so, said writer, activist, teacher, feminist, womanist Audrey Lorded, is our power: "When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid."

We might be afraid, but we get up anyway—compelled and propelled by the divine vision of what is possible for our own lives and what is possible for our neighbors' lives and what is possible for the world. And that is nothing short of life abundant. A world, to borrow again from Isaiah's prophetic vision, where "they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain."

Or 'do not be afraid' might mean, when we are moved enough by our mountaintop visions and experiences to get up and come down the mountain and act on those visions,

that we find that our fear lessens. First we get up and then we are less afraid. Getting up itself is an act of resistance. An act of living into the vision.

Consider this from Rosa Parks, she who famously, and after dedicated training and preparation, sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 after refusing to give up her seat: "I have learned over the years that when one's mind is made up, this diminishes fear; knowing what must be done does away with fear."

What, friends, are you afraid of? What fears, what internal or external obstacles, keep you from getting up and doing what must be done?

There is a time to rest and wait, and a time to act. A time to lie down, and a time to get up. A time to go up the mountain, and a time to come down.

Within this divine rhythm, may our lives be marked by excessive love and not crippling fear. May we find courage to overcome our fears, or at least to get up in spite of them. May we find love to guide and sustain us, individually and collectively, in the work that needs to be done to claim our own belatedness, and to recreate and keep recreating the world we want, the world as God intends. And in so doing, may we see and experience glimpses of that promised land.

Get up, stand up, stand up for your rights.

Get up, stand up, don't give up the fight.

May it be so.