

## Leaving Home: Fearless

A sermon preached by Olena Withrow on Matthew 17:1-9 on Transfiguration Sunday, February 15, 2026 with First Baptist on Fifth, Winston-Salem.

Now solidly into Mid-February, I'm curious how many of us are still feeling the pressure to "make 2026 our year." What major transformation has consumed you or fizzled out? Are you practicing Tai chi each night, watching more Meryl Streep movies, making new recipes or hosting more dinner parties? Or maybe your big transformation was letting go- doing less, no more social media, screen time only on the weekends or not at all on the weekends. I heard from some of you that the snow days were filled with house projects, transforming your space with a new coat of paint, or clearing out those closets you'd prefer to ignore.

The weight of transformation can be a heavy one, as we push and prod and try to prove ourselves worthy of achieving our ideal self, our ideal home, our ideal faithfulness. But before we jump into the next season of trying to earn our way to goodness, what if we consider an alternative. What if there was another way to respond, to practice, to engage, to allow yourself the wonder of being exactly who and where you are, even as the presence of the living God offers a transformation in a way you never could have imagined? Might there be a change of perspective that allows you to see the situation anew? As lent looms large ahead of us the muddy season between winter and spring starts to slowly crawl closer, these visions of transformation often meet us in this transfiguration story.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I love the way James A. Pearson talks about the mud season in his book, *The Wilderness That Bears Your Name*.

You see we're up on the mountaintop in this story, after climbing and climbing, thoughts stirring with all that had happened in the days and weeks before, I like to imagine Peter, James, John and Jesus are looking forward to this brief retreat, the respite to pray and take a breath. It's been unexpected day after unexpected day, teaching and traveling, feeding thousands, Peter walking on the water, tests and stories and oh my word of course they could use some time off! I imagine we all can relate to the overload of unprecedented events. In the last six years alone, we have lived through change after change, crisis after crisis, miracle after miracle, and we know what it is like to be overwhelmed with the magnitude of all there is still to do.

Then, when they get up and away, and it's not so simple a retreat but another unexplainable epiphany in a season of epiphanies, Peter asks the question all of us are wondering- can we just stay right here? Isn't it good for us to be here? We could make a home here in the wildness of this revelation. I can pitch a tent amidst my, albeit limited, understanding of what just happened. It feels safe here- up and away from all the rest of our lives with this dazzling god-man. And while he's still trying to process all that has just happened the cloud overtakes them. The voice booms loud, the disciples are overcome with fear and they fall right over. They hear those words that remind us of the baptismal waters, "this is my beloved, listen to him." Frozen. Stuck. The immensity of encountering the divine in another unexpected way is simply too much to handle, the expanse of God's reality too large to hold in their own capacity.

You know, as I was preparing this week, I was reminded of the early days of our marriage when we first got our beloved dog Howie. We were living in a fourth floor apartment in Wichita, KS as I finished my final year of college, studying late in the library

writing capstone papers, managing work and rehearsal and encountering the general grind that comes with finishing things. And so Devin, bless him, was often the primary dog parent, and would take Howie on long walks after he got off of work, looping around downtown, walking alongside the stretch of river that runs through the city. Howie for her part, was a fairly easy puppy, only devouring a *couple* of my shoes early on. But, for all her people-loving, easy-going nature, she would often get spooked on these long walks, not quite used to being in a city setting if people walked too close or too quick or too *anything* that she deemed frightening she would just plop right down, in a perfect sit as if we had trained her to wait for them to pass. Of course this made us look like great dog owners who had really trained her, which we hadn't. She had no fight, no flight, just freeze. And it became a problem when she would slowly get more and more spooked, freezing, refusing to move, wanting to stay put indoors against all the logic of her needing to go for a walk. It would take a gentle hand, and then a firmer hand, lifting her up, encouraging her with a pat and a treat, reassuring her that it was okay to get up, get moving and get her going again. Over time she became more familiar with her surroundings and her freeze response lessened, but she still sticks close by, checking up to make sure we are with her anytime we go on a walk.

And so, I think about this tendency to freeze, to fear. There is a lot to fear right now. We all know. Let's talk about it. The UN has just declared that our world is entering an era of "water bankruptcy."<sup>2</sup> Our consumption of water has so far outpaced our resources that there may not be a sizable reverse possible in the near future. Despite grievous humanitarian crises the wars in Ukraine and Gaza continue, as do many other global

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<sup>2</sup> <https://unu.edu/inweh/news/world-enters-era-of-global-water-bankruptcy>

conflicts that far exceed our capacity to keep up. And of course we are so aware of the ever increasing violence in the streets of our own neighborhoods. Families torn apart, neighbors keeping watch, mothers killed, nurses killed, students killed. All manner of injustice. This is all real. And so it makes sense, that if we are experiencing any kind of safety at all in the midst of this we might be really tempted to draw the curtains closed, to build a house up on the mountain, to fall over and keep our eyes shut. How can we listen to the call of God? We can't make a difference in this mess! There is so much to fear, what might await me if I look up?

It is tempting to focus in on the dazzle of the transfiguration, the mystery of Jesus being transformed in such a way that illuminates his divinity, that reinscribes his majesty, that baffles our understanding. To focus on the But Jesus is not the only one transformed on the mountain. While some traditions of Christianity want to focus on the radiance of Jesus's transfiguration, others tell the story differently, focused on the disciples. In these tellings, it was not the glistening Jesus that was the miracle, Jesus was always radiant as the son of God, they say, the miracle was in the seeing.<sup>3</sup> Out of their terror, Jesus comes near to his friends, he reaches out and touches them, and as they lift their eyes they hear his words "get up and do not be afraid" and as this new reality settles in, they see him, which of course changes the way they see everything. It's in this touch, as Debie Thomas describes, "that simple, ordinary, human encounter of skin on skin," that "the disciples catch their breath, shed their fear, and return to themselves." We see in this moment that we, like the disciples, are not made for unending transfigurations. Often, like the disciples

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<sup>3</sup> George Mason, "Glimpses of Truth", in *The Word Made Fresh: Preaching God's Love for Every Body*, 7.

on the mountain, “all [we] can take of God’s glory is a tender human hand on [our] shoulder and a reassuringly human voice in [our] ear.”<sup>4</sup>

So the disciples look up, they see their friend, their teacher, their god, and their eyes are opened to a new, or more profound reality. Jesus does not tell them there is nothing to fear, he has told them he will die, has predicted his passion and encounters the criticisms from all sides, and he does not dismiss the truth of reality. Instead, in his embrace, he offers his presence, do not be afraid, for nothing must be faced alone. He models for them the truth that has been a theme of Matthew’s gospel from the beginning - that God is a with-us God, Immanuel.

In his book the anthropocene reviewed, author John Green is writing in the throes of the pandemic. Poking fun at 5-star review systems, he starts to offer his essays as reviews spanning everything from the QWERTY keyboard and Diet Dr. Pepper, to Humanity’s Temporal Range and Our Capacity for Wonder. 3.5 stars, 4 stars, 2 stars - get the picture. I want to share with you another one of the reviews he shares.

“In 1909, the Hungarian writer Ferenc Molnár debuted his new play, *Liliom*, in Budapest. In the play, *Liliom*, a troubled and periodically violent young carousel barker, falls in love with a woman named Julie. When Julie becomes pregnant, *Liliom* attempts a robbery to support his burgeoning family, but the robbery is a disaster, and *Liliom* dies. He ends up in purgatory for sixteen years, after which he is allowed a single day to visit his now-teenaged daughter, Louise. *Liliom* flopped in Budapest, but Molnár was not a playwright who suffered from a shortage of self-belief. He continued mounting

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<sup>4</sup> Debie Thomas, “Is It Good for Us to Be Here?” in *Into the Mess & Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ*, 112.

productions around Europe and then eventually in the U.S., where a 1921 translation of the play attracted good reviews and moderate box office success.

“The composer Puccini tried to adapt *Liliom* into an opera, but Molnár refused to sell him the rights, because he wanted “*Liliom* to be remembered as a play by Molnár, not as an opera by Puccini.” Instead, Molnár sold the rights to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, the musical theater duo who were fresh off the success of *Oklahoma!* In doing so, Molnár ensured that *Liliom* would be remembered almost entirely as a musical by Rodgers and Hammerstein, retitled *Carousel*, which premiered in 1945. In the musical, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s song “You’ll Never Walk Alone” is sung twice—first to encourage the newly widowed Julie after her husband’s death, and then by Louise’s classmates years later, at a graduation ceremony. Louise doesn’t want to join in the song—she’s too upset—but even though her father is now invisible to her, Louise can feel his presence and encouragement, and so eventually she starts to sing. As John Green notes in his telling of this story, The lyrics of “You’ll Never Walk Alone” contain only the most obvious imagery: The song tells us to “walk on through the wind and through the rain,” which is not a particularly clever evocation of a storm. We are also told to “walk on with hope in your heart,” which feels aggressively trite. And it reports that “at the end of the storm, there’s a golden sky and the sweet silver song of a lark.” But in reality, at the end of the storm, there are tree branches strewn everywhere, downed power lines, and flooded rivers.

“The song has been covered by everyone from Frank Sinatra to Johnny Cash to Aretha Franklin. But one of the most famous covers came in 1963 from Gerry and the Pacemakers, a band that, like the Beatles, was from Liverpool and their version became a

#1 hit in the UK. Fans of Liverpool Football Club almost immediately began to sing the song together during games and today, “You’ll Never Walk Alone” is etched in wrought iron above the gates of Anfield, Liverpool’s stadium.

“You see, “You’ll Never Walk Alone” is cheesy, but it’s not wrong. The song doesn’t claim the world is a just or happy place. It just asks us to walk on with hope in our hearts. It seems that two of the fundamental facts of being a person are 1. We must go on, and 2. None of us ever walks alone. We may feel alone (in fact, we will feel alone), but even in the crushing grind of isolation, we aren’t alone. And like Louise at the end of *Carousel*, even if you don’t really believe in the golden sky or the sweet silver song of the lark when you start singing, you believe it a little more when you finish.”

Green gives “You’ll Never Walk Alone” four and a half stars.<sup>5</sup>

As they come back down the mountain where life awaits them, Jesus tells them don’t tell anyone, they won’t get it until they get it, they haven’t seen what you have seen. It’s a “had to be there” kind of moment. Like trying to take a picture of fireworks or retell a joke, like looking out across the sea or summiting a mountain, like witnessing the birth of a child, or holding space for the passing of a loved one, so often there is no expressing the grand expanse of divinity that you’ve encountered. But you’ve been changed. You can still feel the catch in your breath, the lump in your throat, you’ve been transformed, and now reality is not altogether different, but you are. The miracle is in the seeing.

This is where the transformation reaches out of the story and touches us, too. As much as we might like it to be so, the closet does not magically clear out, the screen time miraculously decrease, nor the community deepen without our work to make it so. But it

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<sup>5</sup> With gratitude for John Green’s story, “You’ll Never Walk Alone” in *The Anthropocene Reviewed*. 9-12.

requires a change of perspective to see the possibility ahead, and to allow ourselves to be transformed, too. For any number of reasons and in any number ways that call may come for you, to follow a dream, to take a risk, to make a leap to the next right thing, to travel to a new land, to speak honestly about a hard truth, to leave the possibility of a home that could be so safe and removed from the troubles of our world. Heading back down the mountain does require a choice to go. But having been up that high changes the way you see, for you now realize the journey is not one that must be made alone. In seeing God-with-us, we see God-in-us, the image of divine love at work in and through each person we meet. "Get up, and do not be afraid," we hear, as we look into one another's eyes, as we see the love of God coursing through our community. "Get up and do not be afraid," we hear as we hold hands and march for justice and sing protest songs. "Get up and do not be afraid," we hear as we reach out and touch one another in comfort, in grief, in excitement, in love, in solace, in fierce solidarity. "Get up and do not be afraid," we hear as we leave the potential of a home on a mountain top, and look into the eyes of our friend, not absolved of all fear, but able to fear-less, for the kingdom of heaven is right here in the midst of us, hand on our shoulders, and we do not walk alone. Thanks be to God.