

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska.
Message from Rev. Israel Portilla-Gómez, Associate Rector.

February 15, 2026. Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Scripture readings: Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O lord, my strength and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

Today is the last Sunday before Lent, which starts with Ash Wednesday this week. In many places, carnivals are celebrated around this time of the year. Therefore, I would like to illustrate my sermon with the following story.

In a monastery, every night, one of the nuns would go to take things out of the refrigerator. The other sisters, tired of her “bad habit,” wanted to scare her. They had the Mother Superior dressed as the devil. When night came, the nun went as usual, and when she opened the refrigerator, the Mother Superior jumped out dressed as the devil. The nun, unperturbed, said, “Thank God it's the devil... I thought it was the Mother Superior.”

The perception of fear can defy logic. The truth is that almost everything we fear will never happen. A 2020 study by the Pennsylvania State University¹ found that 91.4% of worries did not come true. So why are we afraid?

Fear is an instinctive alarm that protects our integrity from potential threats. This triggers the body to release adrenaline and cortisol in response to what are commonly referred to as the 4Fs: Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn.

In a state of fear, we cannot be rational or make decisions as we would like, because anxiety diminishes our ability to perceive reality beyond our worries.

In today's Gospel, we see how the disciples Peter, James, and John had an instinctive reaction when “they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.” In Greek, the situation is described as **ἐφοβήθησαν σφόδρα** (ephobēthēsan sphodra). The verb **ἐφοβήθησαν** is the root of the word phobia. It indicates an extreme state of fear, and the disciples' reaction was somewhere between freeze and fawn, or both. This happened during the Transfiguration of Jesus.



The Transfiguration by James Tissot, 1886–1896.

¹ Lucas S. LaFreniere, Michelle G. Newman, “Exposing Worry’s Deceit: Percentage of Untrue Worries in Generalized Anxiety Disorder Treatment, Behavior Therapy”, Volume 51, Issue 3, 2020, Pages 413-423, ISSN 0005-7894. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2019.07.003>

Jesus' attitude is entirely innovative with respect to the Old Testament conception of fear of God, especially regarding direct dialogue with him. It should be noted that the word translated as "fear" in English is not entirely accurate in its Semitic roots; the Aramaic equivalent for "fear of God" commonly used in ancient texts like the Targums is **דחלתא דמרא** (dḥltā d-mārē), which would equate to reverential awe, respect, and submission rather than terror.

However, the story of Exodus tells us that the Israelites were afraid of God after hearing thunder, seeing lightning, and feeling the mountain tremble. Consequently, the Israelites were scared and asked Moses to be the mediator between God and them because there was the belief that anyone who sees God directly would die. Thus, the concept of a close God ceased to exist, as it did in Abraham's time, when he had direct conversations with God.

In the Book of Exodus, we also find that after Moses spoke with God on the mountain covered in clouds, he descended with his face radiant, and for this reason, the Israelites did not approach him out of fear. Therefore, Moses began wearing a veil, thereby conveying the message to the people. It is evident that God appears distant and difficult to reach.

With the Transfiguration of Jesus, closeness to God will change forever. The Transfiguration is evidence that Jesus has the authority as the Son of God. He has as witnesses important figures of the Old Testament, such as Moses, the giver of the Law, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. The voice from heaven is confirming that every concept of God is fulfilled in Jesus.

Jesus saw that his disciples had fear and then "came to them and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'" With this, Jesus is speaking not only to the disciples but to everyone, emphasizing that closeness to God does not depend on the fear that drives us to act instinctively in the face of threats. When the disciples needed reassurance most, Jesus came and touched them, showing that he was physically there to lift them up and help them leave their state of fear: "Get up and do not be afraid."

Sometimes, when we watch the news, the world can seem to be regressing, and we might interpret this as a threat, triggering a fear response. And living in fear means living with high levels of cortisol that keep us in stress and make us sick. Yet, Jesus teaches us that fear cannot be the answer that determines our lives. The answer is love, care, and companionship in the midst of difficult situations, just as he did with his disciples. As people of faith, let us focus on the approximately 9% of fears that may be true and respond with decisions grounded in our convictions and the determination to love beyond despair.

Last week, Rev. Hannah encouraged us to be "watered gardens that hold within them the possibility for growth, new life, and abundance." It is possible when we live in community, as Rev. Michael told us two weeks ago: "Walking in the Way of Jesus is learned. It is practiced... It is made visible and real in Community. We are the Body of Christ." Let us remember what Jesus said: "Get up and do not be afraid." Amen.