*“He did not know what to say, for they were terrified (Mark 9:6).”*

Sometimes, if the circumstances are right, we like to be scared. For example, horror movies have seen a vast increase in their total gross at American box offices over the past fifty years. In the 70s, the years of *The Exorcist*, *Jaws*, and *Alien*, scary movies grossed $230 million. Grosses grew by 26% in the 80s, fueled by the Freddy Kruger and Michael Myers franchises. In the 90s, that figure doubled to $575 million. Last year, in 2017, gross sales of horror movie tickets were the largest in history: $737 million—Steven King’s child-eating clown story *It* earned $370 million alone. What is it about a horror movie—or, for that matter, scary attractions like Millers Thrillers Haunted Woods and Zombie Paintball Hayride that was held on Carters Creek Pike last October—that makes an unpleasant emotion like fear feel fun? Part of the reason is chemical—when we are frightened, our “fight or flight” instinct is triggered by a flood of three hormones: adrenaline, which gave our ancestors superhuman strength to either attack or to run away from threats; endorphins, which give a kind of euphoria that dulls pain; and dopamine, which increases focus and reduces inhibition. The other essential factor is the way our brains function: the pre-frontal lobe, which is the thinking part of the brain, discerns whether there is any real threat and, if we are in a place that we know is safe, turns those fear-based hormones into pleasure. The chemical cocktail of fear becomes enjoyable when served in a glass of safety. Horror becomes fun only when we know that we are in control.

All of this leads to today’s reading from the ninth chapter of Mark’s Gospel: the Transfiguration of Christ. In the previous chapter, Jesus’ teaching became more solemn and even horrific. After eight chapters of miracles, healings, and feedings of multitudes, Jesus tells His disciples that He, the Messiah, must be and will be tortured, put to death, and rise three days later. His disciples, naturally, do not understand or accept this new teaching. As today’s reading opens, it has been six days since Jesus began his new lessons. He takes His three closest disciples—Peter, James, and John—and climbs a tall mountain. When they get to the top, Jesus is transfigured: everything about Him—His face, His body, even His clothes—shine more brightly than the most bleached cloth in the world. Standing beside Him on either side and talking with Him are Moses, the giver of the Law, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. Mark’s gospel does not say what they discuss, but Luke says that they talk about Jesus’ upcoming Passion and death in Jerusalem. It is possible that part of their visit’s purpose is to encourage and comfort Jesus. But I believe, when we read the text closely, main reason they are there is to emphasize and affirm to the disciples that the death of the Messiah was not something that Jesus made up on His own, but was anticipated by the entirety of the Jewish Law and the Prophets found in the Jewish Scriptures. And then, as if the point has not been sufficiently made, a thick, dark cloud covers them from which the voice of God the Father thunders, “This is My Son, the Beloved. Listen to Him!” God wants them to stop listening to their own limited and limiting expectations and to start listening to Jesus’s new teaching about His upcoming death and rising.

Meanwhile, the disciples are absolutely terrified. The Greek word for what they feel—*ekphobos*—comes from Phobos, who was the Greek god and personification of Fear itself. Their terror is so pure that it almost feels divine. The hormonal gasoline of adrenaline, endorphins, and dopamine are surging full throttle. By instinct, not knowing or understanding what he is saying or doing, Peter responds to this fear the way our pre-frontal lobe operates in scary movies—he tries to manage it by exercising control over the triggering circumstances. He says “Teacher, I am so glad that we are here.” Already we know that Peter is faking it—He is terrified. His attempt to seem happy and under control is what we call “whistling past the graveyard.” Peter continues, in so many words, “Let’s build three tents, one for each of you, so that we can have the time and space to safely process all of this. This is a little too much for us. Let’s slow everything down until we feel safe.” But God will have none of it. He is not scaring the disciples to death; he is scaring them to life. It is true that Peter does not want to believe that Jesus will die; naturally, he wants His friend and Lord to live because he loves Him. But Peter is also afraid of dying for Jesus the way Jesus will. The Passion of Christ directly refutes the fallen ways of the world and its self-centered definition of victory, glory, and success. Peter is petrified to see and hear the proof of Christ’s impending death because while he has faithfully followed Jesus, he might have done so at least partially for selfish reasons. Peter, like many, expects Jesus to conquer the Romans and become the king of Israel; when this triumph is accomplished, Peter knows that he will benefit. That attitude is not what it means to live: it is self-absorption painted to look like faithful, loyal piety. Just as suddenly as the Transfiguration started, it ends. They no longer see Moses, Elijah, or a holy cloud: they only see Jesus, who leads the three disciples down the mountain and tells them not to speak of what they saw until after He has been raised. The lesson is over. And yet, in spite of all of this, the disciples start arguing about what this mysterious rising could possibly mean—they still do not get it.

Most of us most of the time come to church, read the Bible, serve others, and give of our wealth mostly because we are looking for something positive in a sometimes-scary world. We do these things because we look for connection with others, peace with ourselves, and meaning in life. These practices are part of the way that we deal with our fears and the stresses they cause, and they are not bad things to do. But sometimes even these good things can become like the tents that Peter wanted to build to try to control God. We want to make our experience of God something that feels safe; we associate threat or danger with being abandoned by God. The truth is that sometimes we go through fearful events or periods, ones that feel like a chapter in a horror novel, not because God has abandoned us, but because He is at work in us. He is constantly at work in us to correct, heal, or purge the things that block and defeat us. These blocks may be patterns of habitual sin. They may be dysfunctional relationships, toxic work environments, or too much time in front of TV, computer, or cell phone screens. They may even be good things. They may even be religious things. Whatever they are, these blocks come from our fallen instinct to develop coping mechanisms, even unhealthy ones, that we use to control life or control God but that actually control us. When God works to remove these coping mechanisms, or to adjust them, or to heal and change them, we will probably feel terrified—like an addict that thinks about a lifetime without his or her addiction, like Peter being stripped of his limited understanding of Jesus. But that kind of fear is actually a sign of our healing.

In C.S. Lewis’ novel *The Great Divorce*, a ghostly soul in the afterlife takes a bus ride from a place that feels hellish to the outskirts of Heaven. He is practically invisible because everything about him has become vain and empty. He is so insubstantial and that place is so Real that it hurts his feet to walk on the grass. He overhears conversations between other insubstantial ghosts and all-too-substantial saints or angels who invite them to leave their self-absorbed coping mechanisms and to climb higher and deeper into the tall mountains of Heaven. Most of the ghosts refuse; these angelic invitations frighten them, and they beg to go back to the hells they came from. The Pilgrim comes across a dark, oily ghost who carries a red lizard on his shoulder. That evil lizard constantly whispers secret thoughts and promises into the ghost’s ear: clearly, the lizard represents some kind of destructive compulsion. Before long, an angel comes forward and offers to kill the lizard and to set the ghost free. The ghost protests, argues, weeps, and wails with fear. Meanwhile, the lizard chatters even more energetically, stoking the ghost’s fear about how lost he will feel without the lizard. Finally, crying out, “God help me,” the ghost surrenders his permission. The angel reaches to grab the lizard, which hisses, snarls, struggles and bites, he breaks the lizard’s back, and the ghost cries out in agony. Suddenly, the Pilgrim sees the ghost shift from fearful pain into an increasingly solid, glorious, magnificent man who is almost as tall and strong as the angel. Then the Pilgrim sees that the lizard has begun to change and to grow until he stands upright as the greatest and most beautiful stallion ever seen. The newly-remade young man thanks the angel, leaps onto his lizard-turned-horse, and together they speed up the mountain to the Heavens faster than a shooting star. The fear and the pain that the ghost suffered as he was separated from whatever entrapped and ensnared him turned out to be only the birth-pain of a new creation, more substantial than he could ever have been on his own and more angelic than he could ever have imagined.

Sometimes, when God intervenes in our life, He brings not peace, but a sword. With it He cuts from us those things that we use to manage and control our lives but only trap and ensnare us. Our separation from them may feel scary, like a death or a crucifixion. But we know from Jesus that the death of the Cross is the only way that we come to the new life of the resurrection. He Himself has walked that solemn and horrible path, and He walks with us through ours. Jesus is not safe: Jesus is love. He said, “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and let him follow me (Mark 8:34).” To follow Jesus means to let parts of us die. But if follow Him through and behind our fear, our pain, and even our death, we will find the true life that never ends. And so, little children, fear not.