

“Totally Amazing”

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him
Peter and James and his brother John
and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

And he was transfigured before them,
and his face shone like the sun,
and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly there appeared to them
Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

Then Peter said to Jesus, “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.”

While he was still speaking,
suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them,
and from the cloud a voice said,
“This is my Son, the Beloved;
with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

When the disciples heard this,
they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

But Jesus came and touched them, saying,
“Get up and do not be afraid.”

And when they looked up,
they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain,
Jesus ordered them,
“Tell no one about the vision
until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

“Totally Amazing”

Matthew 17:1-9

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I.

Have you been watching the Olympics!?! Well *we* have. So much so that you almost did not get a sermon this week. Every time I sat down to write there some other cool event going on and I could not help but watch. The Olympics have always been such a cool thing. Especially for those of us of a certain age who were born after the invention of TV and before the arrival of the internet. When I was young, *everyone* tuned in to watch the Olympics, and that was all we would talk about the next day and for weeks to follow. It was something which allowed us to hold each other in common. The Winter Olympics in particular. While one could often be busy for the Summer Games, when the Winter Games rolled around we were like the Waltons around the radio on a Saturday night for almost two straight weeks.

II.

Of course, during those decades, global geo-politics and social strife were being played out on ice rinks and ski slopes, and in swimming pools and stadiums. Every event was imbued with a symbolism and meaning which went *far* beyond any particular sport or athlete. Gloved fists raised to the sky bespoke the civil rights movement. Regional conflict and the hatred of a thousand years brought unimaginable tragedy. The Cold War occurred in real time in front of our eyes. Miracles happened as David defeated Goliath. Champions were crowned, heroes were both created and proved, and a whole lot of Wheaties boxes were sold.

It seemed that every Olympics Games brought both drama and distraction to our lives like few other things could or would. In those days, patriotism was a pleasantness and pride in one's nation a privilege. More than anything, the Olympics have always been a source of *total amazement*. Oh, not all the time but enough of the time.

III.

Speaking of time, I confess it has been *years* since we have watched the Olympics. Much of this was due to our inability to afford cable or satellite TV for almost all of our married life, and the decision that this was not necessarily a bad thing with regard to raising kids. Now, after some 30 years and having dropped \$20 for a month of the Peacock Network, Linda and I are just tuning back in. What we have discovered has amazed us.

First of all, if the amount of time devoted to covering the sport is any indication, it would seem that *Curling* is now the world's favorite winter pastime. Who knew? I mean, Curling is on ALL THE TIME. It makes one wonder why *we* don't have a Curling rink in the North Country!?! If a 54 year old lawyer from Minnesota can make the Olympic Curling team, maybe anyone of us could as well. Which brings us the best part of any Olympic Games: the stories of individual athletes overcoming adversity to just show up and be able to compete, and the incredibly dramatic finishes to those stories which range from inexplicable and miraculous to devastating and dumbfounding.

IV.

Take yesterday, for example. We watched the Men's Figure Skating Long Program which, together with the scores from the Short Program held earlier in the week, sought to crown a new Olympic Figure Skating champion. The overwhelming favorite going into the competition, who was in first place after the Short Program, was American Ilia Malinin, nicknamed the "Quad God" for his quad-jumping abilities. One of which, the quadruple axel, no one in the world has ever made but him.

Close on his heels in second place was Japanese skater Yuma Kagiyama, who was excellent in the Team competition, and really pushed Malinin. With these two skaters going last, everyone was kind of sleeping walking through those skating before them. One of whom was 21 yr. old Mikhail Shaidorov from Kazakhstan, complete with a full set of braces and pimply face. Somehow, he skated the routine of a life-time and, stunningly, crept into third place with only two skaters, Malinin and Kagiyama, left to battle it out for the Gold and Silver.

V.

In case you are wondering, Kazakhstan lies nestled below Russia's southern border, to the left of China's western border, and just north of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Kazakhstan is the largest of the so-called "Stan" countries, with "stan" being translated as "land" and is used in a fashion similar to *England*, *Scotland*, and *Greenland*, etc.

Back, now, to the live broadcast. It was at this point our hearts really warmed thinking about the possibility that this kid might actually take home an Olympic Bronze medal. The Japanese skater took to the ice to perform his same routine from the Team competition. While not as impressive as Ilia in terms of the jump difficulty, his strength is the relentless execution of perfect landings time and time again. Except on this one particular day, however. Stumbling several times, and even falling, he slid out of position for an almost guaranteed medal and the Kazakh skater moved up to the Silver position with the American "Quad God" about to skate last.

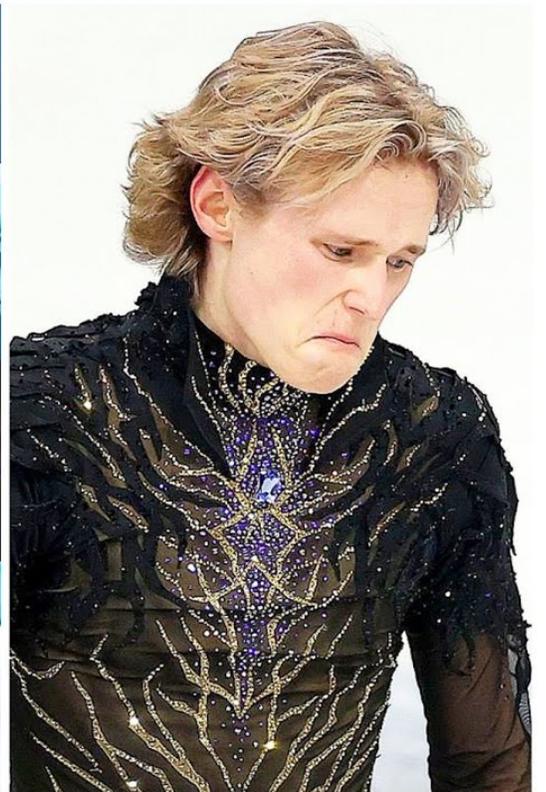
VI.

When this year's Winter Olympics began all the talk was of American Downhill skier Lindsey Vonn. First her remarkable comeback at age 41, then her ruptured ACL suffered during a training run to, finally, the crash on her first run of the competition which resulted in a severely broken leg requiring a helicopter to bring her down off the mountain. From that point forward, though, it was all Ilia all the time. The media build-up to the men's Single was incessant and placed *enormous* pressure on him not only to *win* the Gold, but to do so in the same dominant fashion with which he had skated all year. He just had to go out and do what he has always done.

Except, this day he did not. He, too, stumbled and fell, and proceeded to drop from 1st all the way down to *15th* place. Which moved the Kazakh skater into 1st place and earned him the *Gold* Medal in Men's Singles Figure Skating at the 2026 Milan Cortina Olympics. This first Olympic medal *ever*, of *any* kind, in *any* sport for his country, Kazakhstan. I tell you what, it was one of the most totally amazing sports moments I have ever experienced; and we watched it unfold, live, right in front of our eyes.



The thrill of victory...



...and the agony of defeat.

VII.

Moving now from a miracle on ice to the miraculous on a mountain, we turn to our scripture reading from Matthew 17:1-9. Today is Transfiguration Sunday. Always the Sunday before the start of the Lenten Season, Transfiguration Sunday celebrates the occasion that Jesus ascended a mountain-top to pray; taking with him Peter, James, and John. There, we are told, Jesus was *transfigured*, becoming something more beautiful and elevated. His face and clothes became a dazzling white and, suddenly, there appeared with him in glory Moses and Elijah speaking to Jesus about his departure and what he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Then, a cloud came and enveloped them and a voice said, "*This is my son, my chosen; listen to him.*"

VIII.

The story of the Transfiguration is kind of a "one off" within the New Testament. Its purpose, or so it would seem, was to reveal the glory of Christ, at least in some measure, to Jesus' "inner circle," Peter, James, and John. The Transfiguration also served to symbolically connect Jesus's work and words to the Law and the Prophets as represented by Moses and Elijah.

With a version being found in each of the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) we can assume that the story also served to illuminate and educate the early church about these things as well. Not to mention the countless believers who would follow after down through the ensuing centuries right up to our own.

While that is all fine and well, the story does beg a few questions about the imposed veil of secrecy, and how things might have gone a little smoother and easier all the way around if Jesus had simply flashed a little more of that Transfiguration around every now and then. Both to the people and to the powers that be.

IX.

I have no answer to that for you today. Neither would I make a claim to have a full understanding of the meaning of the Transfiguration. I would, though, make note of two things. First, after Jesus is Transfigured a bright cloud overshadowed the disciples and a voice rose up out of the cloud saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Listen to him. Listen...to...him. Not obey him, not follow him, not praise him. just *listen* to him. What he has to say is going to *change* you. It is going to transform you. You, *too*, are going to be transfigured if you will simply *listen* to him.

Second, sometimes we each need something, mysterious, mystical, and inexplicable to happen in our lives or in the world around us. Something which moves our faith from a head-space to a heart-space. Something which reminds us of who we really are and what we might yet be. Something which totally amazes us.

X.

In case you have not noticed, I think that like the Olympics, this church is pretty darn cool. Certainly because of the very many cool things that we do together and because of all the cool people who call this their place their church home. It is also cool in that this church is what allows us to hold each other in common even as the world beyond our doors finds less and less in which to share. From the global geo-political right down to the social strife at the national and local level. Every prayer we say, song we sing, and act of mission we offer is imbued with a symbolism and meaning which is *far* bigger than anything we could muster on our own as individuals. This is church is where heroes are both created and proved, where we find a helpful perspective about the drama that beleaguers our nation. A place where patriotism is still a pleasantness, and where we might stretch ourselves so as to understand that pride in our nation is a privilege which should be both preserved and properly propagated.

XI.

The best part of our church is all the individual stories of folks who are showing up for their own lives, usually overcoming adversity to do so. Stories which can be devastating and dumfounding, but also inexplicable and miraculous. Usually all at the same time. This church is a place where miracles happen, where David might defeat the Goliaths of the world. Moreover, this church is a source of *total amazement*. Oh, not all the time but enough of the time. And we have the privilege to watch all of this unfold, live, right in front of our eyes which are filled with tears of joy and wonder as we stand together while God transfigures us such that we, *ourselves*, might follow in the very footsteps of Christ in becoming something more beautiful and elevated than we might have ever dared to dream or imagine. Amen.