

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
February 11, 2018 – Transfiguration Sunday - B  
Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I've been doing Bread for the Journey monthly groups for 15 years now with the women of Integrity House – the experience of working with these women has always been a highlight of my ministry and I'm grateful to be able to continue it here at St. Paul's each month. So often, I can't help but think of these experiences when I'm writing a sermon...and this week my mind went back to a graduation ceremony I attended at Integrity – they call it the awards and recognition celebration – and it certainly was that! The Souls of Integrity – their wonderful choir – remember them? Wouldn't it be great to have them back again? Well the choir sang "A Sinner's Prayer" that included singing the Lord's Prayer in a new and profoundly moving way – it touched me deeply. Of course there were some speeches, but we heard testimonies from 4 of the graduates, telling their stories, encouraging those still in the program, all realizing that this step of graduation is a huge milestone in their journey, but the journey is not over by a long shot – it will continue. These men and women are in the fight of their lives – a fight that will continue every day for the rest of their lives – but a fight they are determined to win.

They were all wallowing in their gratitude for their recovery process, for what Integrity has meant to them, and to their Higher Power. One of the students wrote, "First and foremost, I want to thank my higher power. If it wasn't for God I wouldn't have made it through this process. I have come a long way in my recovery. I have been in this program for a year – the hard part wasn't my addiction, my problem was showing up."

Showing up – makes me think about how and when and for what I show up, when we all show up – as individuals and church.

This was a great day and an even greater celebration! It was an honor to be there and experience even only a tiny bit of their joy and I've been thinking about what it means to show up ever since.

Today as we end the season of Epiphany and look ahead to the season of Lent, we have the Story of the Transfiguration – that strange story of Christ there on the mountaintop. A story that's so hard to understand – but maybe it's a story that's meant to be enjoyed, wondered at – rather than be

picked apart and interpreted. It's a story of proclamation – a story of who Jesus is – and with it comes a simple instruction, “Listen to him!”

This story is about mystery, about the mystery of our faith. It's about discipleship – about discipleship that includes failures and setbacks, fears and weakness, as well as our willingness to follow Jesus. It's about climbing mountains! It's about entering into the mystery. It's about showing up.

Mystery. That's such a tough concept for us, isn't it. I think our children have a much better sense of mystery than we do. We lose that sense when we're taught to be analytical, to be scientific, that there is a logical, rational explanation for events – we can get awfully frustrated when we can't come up with a reason, a cause, an explanation.

But by definition, that's what mystery is. It's a quick glimpse. An unexpected, quiet understanding. A quick sense that something awesome is taking place. A sudden realization that we're in the presence of sacred space, in a sacred time. When have you felt like that? A time when all you could say was “wow”? When all you could feel was gratitude for that encounter?

But, as Frederick Buechner says, “We'll often go on as though nothing has happened. Our process of meaning-making can be so quick, so unconscious, that we may disregard, never even notice something new, an event totally outside of our experience. Or we'll try our best to make a new situation fit into our experience. It's hard to cross that line into a new dimension. Coming face to face with that new dimension, that new experience, can make us terribly afraid. And we'll back off. Or we'll ignore it. Or we won't even really notice it. But leaning into that experience is transforming!”

One of the Integrity graduates talked about how she couldn't have imagined living her life without alcohol – she had no problem getting a job but she had a problem keeping those jobs – that water bottle she always had with her was filled with vodka. She talked about the fear she had as she was led to give up her “old friend” that had protected her from pain, fear, worry – how can I cope, drug or alcohol free. She was indeed entering a new dimension in her life and she was afraid. But as she was able to articulate that fear, she took a major step into recovery and she is far better able to make the changes she so desperately sought. Talk about courage. Talk about showing up!

Jesus and 3 of his most trusted disciples, Peter, James, and John, are on a mountaintop. While they are there, Jesus is transfigured: his appearance changes, his clothes are dazzling white and suddenly Moses and

Elijah appear and talk with Jesus. Imagine standing there with Peter, James, and John – how would you feel watching all this?

Let's look at Peter's reaction: he can't ignore what's happening. He can't understand it, but there it is right in front of him. How does he respond? He doesn't look away. He can't! He reaches into his experience of Jewish tradition to explain, to manage the situation. He knows, as we do, that profound experiences of God's presence often take place on a mountaintop – and he knows that tradition tells him that Elijah will appear at the beginning of the last days.

Peter tries to fit all this into his experience – he says, let's build a booth – the Feast of the tabernacles, or Booths, is a festival celebrated in the Jewish tradition honoring God's protection of Israel during their wilderness wanderings. It's a coming together to worship. Peter's response seems appropriate – he could control, tame the mystery, by assigning a ritual to it. He tried to make sense of what he was seeing the only way he knew how. But then the text tells us, he didn't know what to say – the disciples were terrified – we might be too.

But Peter gets pulled through his terror - a voice from the cloud speaks to him, to the disciples standing there together. This is my beloved son. Listen to him. Something entirely new, something mysterious, is happening here!

We're a lot like Peter aren't we – we're here today because on some level we want to be disciples of Christ. We are willing to climb the mountain and follow Jesus – we may get glimpses of what that means some times. Other times we're afraid, confused, uncertain, but something is inside of us – a seed has been planted – somewhere, sometime, we've been transformed. Something draws us here – like Peter, we have questions, we get scared. Sometimes we just don't get it. We try to understand, but we can't all the time. What does being a disciple really mean?

Most of us are sure that our faith is about doing good things, about showing love and care for one another. And so it is. But our faith is also about the yearning to see God and experience God's power. It's about being touched by the spirit and being moved by the voice of God whispering in our ears, touching our hearts. Our faith is about being refreshed by God as much as it is about refreshing others in God's name. We need to be fed!

I talk, mostly listen often, with people in crisis – their question so often is why – why is this happening? I don't understand. Maybe crisis of any kind happens when we feel we have lost control – when events of our lives just don't fit into our experience, when we lose a sense of meaning, when we can't fix, manage, whatever "it" is. How frightening that all can be

– at the very least it’s disconcerting. And we often wonder what’s wrong with us that this faith we have doesn’t sustain us. We wonder what we’ve done wrong, why we’re being punished this way. And when things really get bad, we wonder, where is God in all of this? God is so distant. God can’t be present. We turn aside. We’ve all been there, haven’t we – and so has Peter.

Peter the frightened. Peter the denier of Christ, not once but three times. Peter the one who is wrongheaded. Peter, the one who says the wrong thing, gets the wrong point, asks the wrong question. But also, Peter the rock. Peter, according to Paul, the first person Jesus came back to see after Easter morning.

Peter the disciple who is so like us. He tries to make the transfiguration fit his experience, he babbles to cover his fear. He’s not perfect, and neither are we. But the good news is this: discipleship isn’t about perfection. It’s about failure and setback, difficulty and confusion, fear and terror. And it’s also about love and forgiveness, perseverance and joy, about fulfillment of God’s purpose.

Doesn’t Peter bring us a profound sense of hope. Mark is writing to people just like you and me. Look at Peter – even with all his mistakes, his missing the point, he is still one of Jesus’ most trusted and loved disciples. He stays with it – even his triple denial is not enough to separate him from Christ. And we know, looking back on history, that he does go on to be one of the strongest leaders of the early church.

I like Peter. I get a great deal of comfort and encouragement from him as I read about him. No, discipleship isn’t about perfection. It’s for real people like you and me, human frailties and all, who want to follow Christ – up that mountaintop where we just might experience something new. If we show up in spite of our anxieties and fears.

The transfiguration is a mystery for sure – but it’s also proclamation of who Jesus is and what discipleship should be. Mark wrote this for early Christians – to offer encouragement to those who were being persecuted. We’re not so different from those first disciples are we – we too have fears, weakness, a lack of understanding.

There are 3 proclamations in Mark’s gospel: at Jesus’ baptism a voice says to Jesus, “You are my Son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

Then here at the transfiguration, the voice speaks to the most trusted disciples: this is my Son the beloved. Listen to him.

And at the crucifixion, the centurion watches Jesus breathe his last and says, truly this man was God’s son.

From an affirmation made to Jesus himself, the proclamation is spread to those first disciples, then to the world – the secret is told. The person and work of Christ cannot be contained. It doesn't fit prior experience. It cannot be categorized. It is entirely new. Discipleship is life changing.

If we let it. If we allow ourselves to enter the mystery. If we let ourselves be transformed as the disciples were back there on the mountaintop. If we stop and open ourselves to take it all in. If we realize we can't have a mountaintop experience if we don't climb the mountain! If we show up!

We are witnessing worship of the most profound kind on that mountain with Jesus and the inner circle of his disciples. We are at the heart of our faith there. Because our faith is a gift, something that comes to us, a truth shown to us rather than discovered by us. Do we have the eyes to see?

Have you ever had a moment like that? When you experience down to your very core a time when the veil is lifted, when you have that dazzling vision of who Jesus is? When you let go of all that holds you back and all you can do is do as Peter did – that is, blurt out, Lord it is good. It is good to be here. That's worship. Takes me back to that Integrity graduation – that was worship too!

It's so hard to put this into words – I suspect some of you know what I mean and I hope for the rest of you that you will know what I mean some day. To know that moment of joy, of peace, of unity, of transformation – to be moved into simple praise, pure worship when all you can do is say, thank you. And it can happen anywhere, any time.

I pray that someday, stumbling through our service of worship, we might be granted such a moment of wonder. I pray that the beauty of God might break through to us, might reach down to us. I pray that we'll be open to the special moments, the special touches, that only God can give! I pray that we'll show up to see it, to feel it, to be changed by it! And then to tell others about our experiences!

As we walk together through the coming season of Lent, of penitence, prayer, and silence let us hear the proclamation. I pray that God takes us upon the mountain, that we'll actually follow and be there when God lights the fire, removes the veil. Let there be light and make us shout, "Lord, it is good that we should be here." So may it be. Amen.

Let us pray: mysterious, wonderful, uncontainable God, you come to us in all of your transforming glory, whether we want you or not. You reveal yourself to us, sometimes in the most unlikely places. You transfigure our humdrum, dull, everyday world into the kingdom of heaven. We do not walk away from encounters with you the same as we were before

we met you. You warm our hearts and move our lips to praise you. Therefore, we praise you, shout hallelujah, and fall on our knees before such glory. Gracious God, it is good that we should be here. Amen.