

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 March 3, 2019
 Exodus 34: 29 - 35, Luke 9:28-43
 Revealing the Holy
 The 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.

We have come to the end of the season of Epiphany – the season of light following the birth of the Light at Christmas. Now we move from the bright white to the purple of Lent, color of repentance, color of royalty – into a season of darkness. Today we encounter the Transfiguration – when we experience one of the most mysterious events in the gospel stories. There's no explanation of the bright light that suddenly surrounds Jesus, no explanation as to the appearance of Moses and Elijah – but what I do know is this: that very, very important events in the Bible take place on mountaintops – people meet God at these high places and we should pay attention to what's happening here – we are witnesses to an extraordinary moment in the journey from the manger to the cross and we have much to learn from all this. We hear God's voice loud and clear just as we did at the moment of Jesus' baptism telling us who Jesus is – this is my son – the beloved – and we also hear God's voice telling us how we are to respond: listen to him!

Luke tells us that Jesus takes his inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John, to the mountain top – just them. The text tells us of the demands of the crowds – the work of ministry never ends – and Jesus takes them away from it all - to the mountain to pray. The tired disciples at some point nearly fall asleep – but Jesus continues in prayer – continues to prepare himself for the events that lie ahead – the trip to Jerusalem, the trip to the cross that awaits him there. He's just told his disciples about that – imagine how they're feeling. But here before they can fall deeply asleep, they see a flash of radiance, of glory. Jesus, who must have reached the top of the mountain just as sweaty and dirty as they were, now shines brilliantly – we're told, “The appearance of his face changed and his clothing became dazzling white.” Then just as suddenly, Elijah and Moses appear - they begin a conversation with Jesus – talking about Jesus' departure. The actual word is “exodus” and they speak of it as something Jesus would accomplish. The fulfillment that comes at Jerusalem.

Mountaintop experiences – we've all had times in our lives when we've had experiences we could not explain, or moments when we've felt God's presence so strongly. Who can explain how the divine is present in everyday experience? Who can describe these visions of the eternal? Who would believe us if we did try to speak? Words fail us.

Last week I asked the group gathered for the first confirmation class, have you had such an experience of feeling God's presence so strongly? I saw smiles and nods – “oh yes” – we agreed that these times do exist – but we do have to pay attention or we'll miss them!

Sometimes God's presence becomes clear to us as we regroup in times of retreat for prayer, meditation, rest – perhaps right here in worship.

Sometimes it's in the midst of a struggle, at a bedside or at a graveside, that the meaning of the gospel and the nature of God become so clear to us in ways that transcend ordinary experience. We discover a purpose or a calling or a truth that casts a radiant light over the rest of our lives. We discover that light, right here, right now where we are living.

That light is visible – it's so real. I've experienced it! Haven't you? The glow that comes with the birth of a baby. The peace that comes when a loved one is no longer suffering. The light that comes at the sound of a birdcall or at the stunning quiet of the freshly fallen snow – those moments, seconds, when we allow ourselves to be truly in the presence of the God who calls us, the God who loves us, in the presence of the light that bathes us and comforts us. It's then we know that the divine is indeed present in everyday life. It can bring tears to our eyes and weaken us to our toes. It also can bring a profound strength in the midst of our weakness, our pain, and brings a hope that words just cannot describe.

What do we do next? Like Peter, we want to hold onto that feeling. But we know that the experiences of life that are the most significant can't be bottled and saved. Deep experiences can't be preserved, they can only be cherished, savored. Peter blurts out, "Master, it is good for us to be here" and asks if he could construct three dwellings – one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah. To save the moment. But he can't. And neither can we.

They hear God's voice, "This is my Son, my chosen. Listen to him." When Peter, James, and John looked around, everyone but Jesus had disappeared.

The disciples, Peter, you, me: none of us can stop time or live on in the radiance of the moment forever. Discipleship means following, moving on. Faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment in time but by following that moment in confidence that God is leading and that what lies ahead is even greater than what has already happened. True for us as individuals – and as individuals gathered in the Body of Christ right here in this church community.

So we savor those moments and like the disciples, go back down the mountain – back to the "real world" and maybe have trouble telling anyone about what has happened. This transfiguration, this transformational experience may confuse us, even frighten us a little, but it does not and never will take us out of the real world - the real world where Jesus and his disciples lived, the real world in which we live. The real world which so often is in the valley – the valley where there is pain, poverty, evil, longing, hurt, and so much need. It's in the valley where we are to minister, where we live much of our time. But it's on the mountaintop, it's in our encounter with God in Christ, that we have the strength and courage to work and be in those valleys where we live.

This is a strange story – yes – but it's full of deep spiritual truths too. Each and every one of us wants to find God. Each and every one of us searches for ways to know God. There's a deep longing, a deep desire to reach out and find our way to God, to touch God. We want that connection – we all do.

The thing is, though, is that God is beyond human reach. People can do anything in the world to climb higher and higher but they won't be able to reach up to God. God is available to everyone and anyone, not because we can reach up to God, but because God in Jesus reaches down to all of us.

Yes, all people are looking for God but Christian tradition proclaims that God can't be found because God is not lost. We are the ones who are lost, and it is God who reaches down

and finds us and never stops doing that. It is God who finds us who are lost even in those deepest valleys of pain and suffering, finds us through the divine intervention of Jesus Christ. All we have to do is turn to the light, meet the light. And that light will strengthen and sustain us. That's a promise.

We have in some sense, seen Jesus transfigured – we have met Him and been fed or healed and so we have some experience of the “light” that is in and through Him. Just as we have seen the end of a storm transfigured by the return of light, so we have seen his light at some time or place in our own lives if only for a moment and we shall never be the same. Oh yes, we still, like Jesus, have the way of the cross to walk in our lives, but Jesus has gone before us preparing the way. Having been given the grace of the light, we can walk in its presence, His presence, and our lives too, our community life too, will be transfigured if we let his light shine through us.

A child once defined a saint this way: they are the people the light shines through. The child was thinking of the saints in a stained glass window – and we know that here is a perfect definition of a saint – one through whom God's light shines in the world.” We are called, all of us, to let our lives be transfigured too so that the light will shine through.

Life is made up of both mountaintop and valley experiences – and Jesus is with us in all of them. His light, our light, will shine forth in the middle of the extraordinary moments of life as well as in the middle of the ordinary, routine, all those varied moments of our lives. In the midst of pain and joy. In the midst of work and play. In the midst of death and birth. At the high points and at the lowest of the low. We are called to let that light shine through us as often as is humanly possible – I'd like to say all the time but I also know that won't happen. But we are those to whom the light has come – and it is in our everyday lives that the light must shine through so others may receive the light just as we have. Not only on the mountaintops but also somewhere along the way to the cross in the valley.

We begin our journey into Lent on the mountaintop. We seek to look at ourselves and our service to our neighbors and our God especially this season. We center ourselves on letting the light shine through rather than on the darkness that is in all of us. Yes, we must be honest about our sins, our failures, our doubts and our need for God's grace – Lent calls us to ponder this. But the real story of Lent and the real value of Lent will come as the light returns at Easter, the most profound mountaintop experience we can imagine.

We know what the light calls us to: to justice, to honesty, to humility, to the service of God's children everywhere. And the question for each of us as individuals and as church is whether we are indeed willing to open ourselves to let his light shine through us. As Jesus turned toward Jerusalem to walk his way of the cross, so we too are called to walk our way of the cross as well, just as He did. The good news is this: the light gives us both the direction and the strength to follow – going up and down from the mountaintop, into the valley of shadows, and back up again.

Here's the question for us to ponder: what sacred experiences in your life have fundamentally changed you? When have you encountered a sense of the Sacred that left you breathless or in awe. What happened next?

Cameron Trimble, from the Center for Progressive Renewal, speaks of conversations she has had with people wondering about the meaning of their lives. She says, “I find that they are

not so much looking for a “reason” as for a “feeling.” They – we – all want to feel alive – to feel God! We want to experience the power of life pulsing through our bodies. We want to be transformed, to be made new, to be made whole. It matters that Jesus had this experience with others – Moses, Elijah, the disciples. Change is disorienting. When we change we need the ancestors to surround us and our friends to steady us. We are made to walk this journey together.”

I pray that you encounter God today in a way that takes your breath away. Don’t turn your eyes or walk away. Walk straight into that cloud of grace. Transformation is God’s promise to all of us and ultimately the hope of the world.

We’re called to be light for each other – to love each other through the valleys and high points of our lives. We are told by a gracious God who loves us to death: this is my Son. Listen to him! May we all have the ears to hear and strength and courage to live and share that good news. May we lean into God’s promise of transformation to all of us as individuals and as church – transformation which is the hope of the world. So may it be. Amen.