

St. Paul's Congregational Church, February 26, 2017  
"Holy Ground"  
Matthew 17:1-9; Exodus 24: 12-18 – Transfiguration A  
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.

Many years ago I was on a retreat in southern Vermont with a group of adults from my home church. It was truly a beautiful place – we could look out at the mountains, watch the deer at dawn and dusk. We climbed through the woods to unbelievably beautiful spots that looked over farms – like postcards we've all seen. There was one place where we could see 4 states on one of those wonderfully clear mornings. It was late Saturday night – a cool, crisp, clear night in the spring when before we went to bed, a couple of us went outside. What awaited us that night was the most spectacular display of Northern Lights I'd ever seen, before or since. They were brilliant but muted, soft colors – all colors of the rainbow as I remember – stretched across the sky. And as we watched they'd fade and strengthen, the designs would change, move across the dark, starlit sky. It was breathtaking. Someone went inside and woke up those who'd already gone to bed – this was a sight that just couldn't be missed. So there we gathered, some wrapped sleepy-eyed in blankets, standing outside just watching.

Of course, there was one in our group who wanted to explain the science of this display. But, you know, in those moments, I just didn't care – the voice was almost an intrusion – I just wanted to stand there and be there, savoring the experience, taking it all in. I wanted to bottle it! I felt such a sense of wonder, of oneness with God's creation, of feeling so connected with my friends and family who were also sharing that experience. I have to tell you, it brought tears to my eyes.

And then it was over. The colors faded one last time and all we saw in the sky were the sparkling stars – beautiful to be sure, the sky was that dark expanse we can only see when there are no streetlights or city lights anywhere for miles. We all finally went in to bed, the memory of this permanently etched in our hearts and minds. We'd shared something sacred, I think.

Maybe this is one way we can experience this wondrous, mysterious story of the transfiguration. We can't explain it, can we – although there are biblical scholars who have tried to. We can only be in the moment of excitement and discovery, share in that mountaintop experience that helps us see our lives more clearly; that experience that touches our very souls, that mountaintop experience that must be proclaimed, shared, not explained.

This is the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany – the season of light that begins with the birth of the light at Christmas - that season when Jesus is proclaimed as Son of God, where God is revealed through the person of Jesus in the world. There's a series of 3 proclamations we hear: at Jesus baptism a voice says to him, "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." Here, there's no evidence that anyone but Jesus heard the voice.

At the transfiguration, the voice speaks again to those on the mountaintop, this is my son, the beloved. Listen to him! The proclamation is spread to those first disciples on that mountaintop.

And at the crucifixion the centurion watches Jesus breathe his last and says, truly this man was God's son. Now, the secret is told to the world by a most unlikely person.

In each of these proclamations we have a glimpse of holiness, an encounter with the divine, that if we have eyes to see, will continue to expand our own spiritual vision. And each one of us needs the gift of a vision to let us see that which we don't expect to see – a transfiguration that leads to transformation. That moment of new sight, of new experience, of the sense that we are indeed in the presence of the sacred, on sacred ground. Words don't – can't explain this sense, can they. Think about a time when you had an experience such as this.

We can identify, though, with the disciples in this story, can't we. We can understand their fear as these very strange events unfold up there on that mountain. We can understand why Peter wants to hold on to this experience – he wants to bottle it – he wants to build a booth to contain the experience, to keep it forever. We can understand, I think, how Peter knows something incredible, something wonderful is happening here, but he doesn't know what it is or what to do with it. Nothing about this makes real sense to him. And he, like all of us, needs to make meaning out of this experience.

But he can't. And we can't. Those moments of recognition, encounter, and understanding, can't be described, can't be fixed in time, can't be planned. They just are.

And in the same way that the science of the Northern Lights didn't matter that night, that I could never take a photograph of them, that I could never reproduce those colors on paper – in the same way that Peter couldn't hold onto his experience, we are called to simply be in the moment, to enjoy it, to savor it, and to listen to whatever words or however it is that God speaks to us.

Have you ever noticed how good children are at doing just that? How they are so in the moment of delight, of joy, of wonder – we can take a lesson from them, can't we.

Some years ago I met with the son of a woman who had Alzheimer's disease as we planned her funeral. She no longer recognized her son, her grandchildren and lived in a nursing home on a hill in Connecticut. Her son talked about how she would sit in the window of her room and look out, especially in the fall. She would delight in the beauty of the sun setting over the city – she'd point out the church steeples standing high among the spectacular trees. She would turn to him and encourage him to see the beauty there – the joy of the moment. He said, you know, she knew something I didn't – even though her memory was gone and it was terribly difficult to communicate with her, she was able to savor the joy of the moment. No explanations, nothing but wonder and delight. Her son learned something about letting experiences just be. That's a lesson for all of us, too, isn't it.

The story of the transfiguration continues with that directive: listen to him. Don't talk. Don't plan. Don't analyze. Just listen. Just savor it. Then share it!

Mountaintop experiences – we’ve come to recognize the mountaintop as a place of divine revelation in the bible. Moses received the tablets there. Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind there. The transfiguration takes place on the mountaintop.

We describe those sudden, fleeting, lifechanging moments in our lives as mountaintop experiences. Moments when we are in touch with something bigger, more profound, more wonderful, than anything else we’ve ever encountered before. Moments when we are so fully aware of God’s presence, that all we can do is tremble in awe and whisper, YES, or OH MY. And offer perhaps a quiet, perhaps wordless, prayer of thanksgiving.

It’s that vision from the mountaintop that sustains us and us as church here at St. Paul’s when we return to the valley where perhaps the truth is not so clear. That sacred moment passes and like the disciples, we must come down from the mountaintop and ask, what’s next. When we walk down the mountain with Jesus, do we go where he leads us? Do we, how do we listen to him?

We come down from the mountaintop to the valley – we may not know what to do next, what to say, where to go – but the important thing is to listen for him, listen to him, to hear his reassuring voice. The important thing for all of us is to let that mountaintop experience transform us – to let that experience change us. When I left Vermont after that retreat I surely didn’t want to go back to the “real world” – being closely together in community like that for a weekend, away from the banking world, the world of laundry, of grocery shopping, of traffic, of noise was a real gift. How do we let experiences like that change us. Or do we leave them on the mountaintop so we can get back into our routines.

On that retreat something else happened in addition to the wonder of the Northern Lights – we shared communion in a circle – we used real wine that day. When the tray of small cups was passed, it came back with one still in it – we’d had exactly enough cups for our group. Turns out one of the women in the group was an alcoholic – this was the beginning of her recovery process as she told us of her struggle that had been going on for many years. None of us had any idea of this before this profound time. We all came down from the mountaintop changed.

The question for us is this: are we open to being transformed – as individuals and as church? Each mountaintop experience we have with God opens us to more. We see more clearly. We see more fully. We become more open to those sacred moments. And we hear the voice speaking directly to us: this is my beloved son. Listen to him.

Let us be drawn to the mountain where we may be touched by God’s wondrous light, and enabled to see Jesus more clearly, to hear Jesus more clearly. And let us come down from that mountain, changed, transformed, to do the work that Jesus has called us to do, together.

Let us listen. Let us see. Let us believe. Amen.