

Sermon
Smyrna UCC
February 26, 2017
Transfiguration Sunday

“Going to the Mountain”

Scriptures: (Lectionary)
Old Testament – Exodus 24:12-18 – Moses on the Mountain
New Testament – Matthew 17:1-9 – Jesus transfiguration

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer. Amen.

In the back of the chapel on the campus of St. Olaf College in Minnesota, is a stained glass window which depicts the Transfiguration story Carl read to us from Matthew this morning. Jesus has gone up to the mountain. He is enrobed in flowing garments, his face dazzling, as he stands near Moses and Elijah, with Peter and James. When the afternoon light shines through the window, Jesus glows gloriously.

I have never been to the mountain to encounter God, and returned, with my face lit from the glory, like Jesus, or like Moses before him. But I heard of my grandmother’s appearance, in the nursing home where she lived. The story was told to me by my sister, shortly after it happened.

For several years, following a series of strokes, Nanny was mute and stoney-faced, and her eyes never seemed to focus. She was in the nursing home by then, and when you went to see her you were never sure if she knew that you were there. You never knew if she understood a single word you said.

One morning, things took a sudden turn for her, and it was clear she would soon pass from this world. The staff tried to reach my parents, to ask them to hurry in. But, this was twenty years ago, in the dark ages before the advent of cell phones. They couldn’t reach my

folks, who had gone to town for groceries. So, the staff called my sister, who lived just a block away, and was home at the time.

Karen raced over to our grandmother's side, where she found her lying in bed, quiet and still. But moments later, my sister told us, Nanny sat up, absolutely transfigured. Her face was glowing, lit from within. She was rising up from her bed, reaching out with eager anticipation toward whatever or whoever it was that she saw.

Then our grandma laid back down to rest, and die, in peace.

That experience gave my sister, and all of us in her retelling of it, great comfort in the days and years that followed.

No, I have never been to the mountaintop in such a way, myself. But I have, however, been transfigured in the opposite direction. Take yesterday morning, for example. My sermon wasn't finished yet. I had a long list of things I needed to do, and was feeling less than charitable toward everyone who wasn't aware of my list and who wasn't offering to help me accomplish said unknown tasks.

The clouds gathered around me, and MY face was transfigured into the kind of appearance that is seldom represented in stained glass windows. I was wearing a stormy face. It's not a good look, or demeanor, for anyone. Unlike Peter who offered to build a booth for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, nobody offered to build a booth to remember the moment. By the way, Steve is out sick this morning with kidney stones, not boycotting my sermon due to my transfiguration moment yesterday.

Interestingly enough, in the Boe Chapel Window at St. Olaf, Jesus' isn't **entirely** glowing, either. Notably, Jesus' feet are, in the words of alumna Elizabeth Palmer, "decidedly

not glorious. One might even describe them as ugly. They're skinny and bony and pointy, with calluses. They like the kind of feet that would smell bad. They are, in fact, nearly identical to the feet of the non-divine humans who stand next to Jesus on the mountain.”

Human feet. Jesus had very, very human feet. Just like us. Human moments. He had them, too.

Sometimes we are on the mountain with God, friends, in those glorious moments when life is simply shining. Did you see the sunset yesterday? Have you seen what is springing from the ground? Have you seen little Nickson, Carly and Nick's new baby, or anybody's new baby?

And sometimes we are in the valley with an illness, a worry, a problem, a grief. There are times we are turned from God, away from hope, adrift from the light that seeks us, always. Sometimes it seems there is not enough love in the world to heal our pain.

The transfiguration, though, reminds us that the mountains and the valleys are connected. The transformation reminds us that our feet are connected to our faces, and our souls are embodied in the entirety of our beings. That which is sacred is connected to that which seems perfectly ordinary and mundane.

Transfiguration Sunday is the last Sunday before we enter the season of Lent. It stands as the doorway between Jesus' life and death. Jesus' life starts with the light of a brilliant star, announcing the birth of a quiet child, who was to radically change the course of human history.

His life ends with the dark despair of the cross on that hill called Calvary. And yet, there is more.... In between his birth, and his death, is his life, where he poured his soul into the world, connecting us all.

Jesus' life is spent in days of healing the sick and reaching out to the lost. Feeding the hungry. Telling the weak that they are strong. Telling the children and the homeless that they are important. Telling the women that they have much to offer the community. Telling those who are different that he will come have dinner with them. Welcoming and healing the mentally ill. Calling the fishermen and day laborers to be ministers of compassion. Lifting up worries and cares in prayer to the God of all Creation. Taken as a whole, the life of the itinerant peasant preacher Jesus of Nazareth is a divine spark that has the potential to transfigure our world.

Transfiguration Sunday connects the light and the darkness, the past and the future, the sacred and the profane, the highs and the lows, we humans who are made of frailties, AND made in the image of God.... It is an opening between this world and the next, between what we see now in a mirror dimly and then shall fully see.

As Elizabeth Palmer points out, "This [opening, this transfiguration] doesn't mean that we should expect all evil to be redeemed in a singular spectacular moment of divine intervention. It doesn't mean we should wear rose-colored glasses to avoid the work of living ethically in a broken world. It doesn't mean that we will get to glow like Jesus or float in a cloud of glory.

It DOES mean that there is potential in the most ordinary places for transformation. It means that grace comes to us in mundane form: bread, a word, water, the stranger, a breeze, a pair of skinny feet. The promise of transfiguration is that the glory of God transforms our world – and us – from the inside out."

I'm going to leave the final word to the preacher John Amos, from Marilyn Robinson's novel, *Gilead*. John Amos says this, one Sunday morning, in his sermon: "It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to

radiance—for a moment or a year or a span of a life.... Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration.”

May our eyes be opened to the transcendence and transfiguration that surrounds us, as we walk with feet of clay and God’s spirit within.

Thanks be to God. Amen? Amen.

(Quotes from *Christian Century*, Feb. 1, 2017, pg. 19)