

Worship for February 14, 2021

Transfiguration Sunday

Racial Justice Sunday/Science and Technology Sunday/Valentine's Day

Pastor John

*"No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome at St. Paul's United Church of Christ!"*

Greeting/Musical Welcome

Love is Greater than Fear (The Many)

Call to Worship (unison)

There are times when God calls us to come and rest, be at peace.

Wisdom meets us like a friend, settling our anxiety and bringing us comfort.

There are times when God comes to us through chaos and disorder.

Love moves like a mighty wind, troubling all efforts to dominate and control.

God brings stillness. God stirs up. God is restful and restorative. God is wild and disruptive.

Let us welcome God in many forms, trusting the Spirit through confusion and clarity.

Gathering Hymn - We Have Come at Christ's Own Bidding

(New Century Hymnal #182)

We have come at Christ's own bidding to this high and holy place,

Where we wait with hope and longing for some token of God's grace.

Here we pray for new assurance that our faith is not in vain,

Searching like those first disciples for a sign both clear and plain.

Light breaks through our clouds and shadows, splendor bathes the flesh-joined Word,

Moses and Elijah marvel as the heavenly voice is heard.
Eyes and hearts behold with wonder how the Law and Prophets meet:
Christ with garments drenched in brightness, stands transfigured and
complete.

Strengthened by this glimpse of glory, fearful lest our faith decline, We,
like Peter, find it tempting to remain and build a shrine. But true
worship gives us courage to proclaim what we profess,
That our daily lives may prove us people of the God we bless.

Opening Prayer (unison)

Holy Companion, so much violence is born from our need to control.
Every day, fear and uncertainty are weaponized through words, policies,
and institutions. In a world that idolizes security, teach us to be open to
the gifts of letting go. May we not be reckless with vulnerability, but
practice patience with discomfort and solidarity through good trouble.
Amen.

Scripture - Mark 9:2-9 (from Inclusive Language Lectionary)

Peter, James, and John witness the transfiguration of Jesus.

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and Jesus was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely bright, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." For Peter did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Child; to this one you shall listen." And suddenly looking around they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus

charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Human One should have risen from the dead.

Sermon

This final Sunday in the season of Epiphany brings us once again to the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus as we look forward to the beginning of the Lenten season. The text is no doubt familiar, perhaps because it appears about the same time each year. This is a rather strange story, is it not? This story of the Transfiguration.

And maybe..it's really not so much a story about what happened to Jesus...but more of a story about what happened to those who were hanging out with Jesus when whatever happened...happened.

The mountaintop as the location for these events sets the stage. Those places were understood by the ancients as places where divine encounter took place. Sister Joan Chittister says that "mountains..in Greek, Hebrew, Roman, and Asian religious literature were always places where the human could touch the divine." Our Gospel read today connects with this ancient understanding of the mountaintop as a place where the divine could be seen and encountered in tangible life-changing ways.

As to what supposedly happened..you could get a migraine from reading all the Bible commentaries on that subject. Even the experts can't agree. They call it anything from an apocalyptic vision of some kind to a resurrection story that landed in the wrong place!

But perhaps it doesn't really matter so much WHAT it is; that maybe our focus should be on the reaction of the disciples...what happened to them in the process..instead of what happened to Jesus.

Whatever the experience 'up there on the mountain', it must have been frightening for Peter, James, and John. And when we're afraid, even in a good way, we don't know how to react. There's Peter, the extrovert, who

is never shy about making his opinion known. He starts talking...and thinking...and then making some suggestions. He blurts out, "Let's build three memorials...one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." What's that all about? Was it a burning desire to stay put...to memorialize the very moment that was experienced?

Peter attempts to create some sort of permanence around whatever happened. He probably wants to keep them all where they are at. "Lord, it is good for us to be here." The experience was good for Peter and the disciples. They are in the midst of something awesome and the best that Peter can offer is to keep it all contained...to leave it on the mountaintop, in a booth..or on display. Probably not what Jesus had in mind though. As R. Alan Culpepper says, "Faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment, but rather faithfulness follows God in trust toward the future."

No doubt Peter is really like many of us. We like to "process" an experience...we often try to talk our way into some sort of understanding, so that we can absorb the meaning of an experience and then make that meaning part of who we are. That's to be expected, because we humans, after all, are seekers of meaning.

Well somebody, presumably God, squelches Peter's ideas and basically tells him and all the others to stop the talking and listen up for a change. To stop and pray...to be open to and strengthened by the unexpected and indescribable grace of God.

Then, with no indication that they all are any wiser for what happened, they take off down the mountain and their puzzlement deepens when Jesus tells them to keep quiet about whatever happened until after he has "risen from the dead." This scenario is followed by an episode in which the disciples are powerless to heal a demon-possessed boy.

Yikes! Talk about some wounded and bruised egos among them! Can you imagine at this point in time these first followers might have had some major doubts lurking around in their minds? Such as...how on earth was following somebody who was going to fail, who even knew he was going to fail, and who insisted on following the course anyway...how was that going to make any difference in the way things are in the world?? A world then...and a world now, full of self-righteous destructiveness..a world divided along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and class. Sometimes it seems as if the world has not really evolved all that much along those divisions.

What about US in the midst of it all? Are we really all that much different from those early disciples—those who saw the vision..their breath taken away..all a quiver..and then to experience a dramatic shift. To feel a bit beaten down..overwhelmed by the circumstances of a world in turmoil. Especially now, in the midst of a pandemic..I bet most of us have been there.

No wonder the disciples wanted to stay on the mountain! Perhaps part of the reason for doing so was to retreat from the clamoring crowds down below. Perhaps the disciples reflect our own withdrawal from the world in the face of so many needs...and now with our physical isolation necessitated by the pandemic. There's also the news of terrorism, natural disaster, and racial strife. With that instinct to sort of disengage, we can sometimes draw back into our own safe and familiar harbors. But doing so can make it even more difficult to understand and appreciate the plight of our neighbors.

The United Church of Christ has designated this Sunday as Racial Justice Sunday. The role of race in America today has re-emerged to the fore of our consciousness and conversations in part by the Black Lives Matter movement, along with coverage by the news and the voices of social commentators and faith leaders. And yet, despite the heightened

awareness about the lived experience of people of color, there remains a great distance and disconnect between white and minority communities. Indeed, the very troubles experienced by communities of color are largely invisible to many of us who are white.

Rev. Keith Anderson, in an article from the Huffington Post religion section, says that one reason for this disconnect is that our social networks are largely homogenous—that is, within them, we all look the same, act the same, and talk the same. He says that, in part, because of this homogeneous nature of our social networks, we have become disconnected from each other's realities. When we only relate and engage important questions with folks similar to us, it reinforces our perspective rather than expanding it. Today, perhaps more than ever we must diversify our networks and move beyond our racial and socio-economic enclaves. I know for me personally that is much easier said than done!

Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie has warned of the danger of seeing the world through a single lens, or, as she has said, a single story. She says that when we only know or tell one story about a person, place, or community, we miss the complexities of those people and their reality. She says, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

Well, no doubt, we have all had those “on the mountain” type experiences. We need those enriching type of experiences, but yet we shouldn't let those moments completely define us. Thing is, it is hard to trudge down the mountain sometimes. Maybe part of the problem with the disciples wanting to stay is that they misunderstood and mistook the Transfiguration experience as the single defining revelation of God in Jesus. Certainly a great moment of some nature...but not the full picture. Perhaps God's ultimate display of love is not in glory or dazzling

whiteness, but in a sort of self-emptying, and in solidarity with the oppressed and the suffering of the world.

Jesus' call to follow him might be to come out of our enclaves or safe havens. He calls us to be with our neighbors, to listen, and to show mercy. Jesus calls the privileged to follow his example: to lay down that privilege for the sake of our neighbors and for the good of the world.

May we be awake to what God is doing in the world, in our lives, in the lives of our neighbors, and in the life of this faith community of St. Paul's UCC. In every moment of human communion, direct or indirect, with the holy and with one another. Even as we are separated in physical distance. Within those moments may we seek the moments of our own personal transfiguration that invite us to new, and varied, and meaningful encounters with our God.

Thanks be to God!

Pastoral Prayer/Lord's Prayer

Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Closing Hymn - You Are Salt for the Earth, O People

(New Century Hymnal #181)

You are salt for the earth, O people: salt for the reign of God!
Share the flavor of life, O people: life in the City of God.

Bring forth the reign of mercy, bring forth the reign of peace;
Bring forth the reign of justice, bring forth the City of God!

Your are a light on the hill, O people: light for the City of God!
Shine so holy and bright, O people: shine for the City of God!

Bring forth the reign of mercy, bring forth the reign of peace;
Bring forth the reign of justice, bring forth the City of God!

You are a seed of the Word, O people: bring forth the reign of God!
Seeds of mercy and seeds of justice, grow in the City of God!

Bring forth the reign of mercy, bring forth the reign of peace;
Bring forth the reign of justice, bring forth the City of God!

We are blessed and a pilgrim people: bound for the reign of God!
Love our journey and love our homeland: love is the City of God!

Bring forth the reign of mercy, bring forth the reign of peace;
Bring forth the reign of justice, bring forth the City of God!

Blessing/Benediction

Domination and control, violence and force-these are the tools through
which evil comforts.

But God accompanies through a scandalous presence:

Vulnerable and free, courageous and collective. A holy together;

God sends us to practice love that knows there is no peace where there is
no justice, and transformation depends on discomfort and disruption.

Open to Sacred Encounters wild and unexpected, may it unfold among us.

The power of God in us. Let us go and live it with faith. Amen.

The peace of the earth be with you

The peace of the heavens too

The peace of the rivers be with you

The peace of the oceans too

Deep peace falling over you

God's peace growing in you.

Closing Announcements

***Blessing**

Numbers 6:24-26

All: The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.

***Call to Worship, Opening Prayer, and Benediction from *Enfleshed, 2020* (Paid subscription for use in worship services).**

****Love is Greater than Fear from *The Many* (purchased with permission to use in worship.)**