

*A Spiritual Twilight Zone*

Jubilee Mennonite Church  
February 26, 2017

**Purpose:** To explore how we encounter God in the midst of challenging circumstances.

**Message:** As we encounter the power of God, we are invited to rest in God's presence, being challenged by the opportunity to encounter God's glory when we do see it.

**Scriptures:** Primary: Mark 2:2-10 (I will read as a sermon text)  
Secondary: II Kings 2:1-14 (to be read by someone else)

**Synopsis:** We encounter God in a variety of ways. In most cases we fail to recognize the encounter that we have with the divine until the experience has past. Like Peter, James and John our first response is to think of the requirements the situation presents, busying ourselves with activities and attempts to facilitate the encounter. Like gapping fans, we most often fail to recognize the holy, and don't know what to do when to do recognize it. When we are given these fleeting glances of the power of God, our one task is to listen and to appreciate the gift that we are given. These moments, in the vast variety in which they arrive, are fleeting and only require that we relish them, allowing ourselves to be changed by the encounter.

**Scripture:**

The Transfiguration: An Amalgum

Matthew 17:1-13, Luke 9:28-36, Mark 9:2-10

About a week after                      predicting his own death,

Jesus took a trip into the wilderness,  
Climbing a mountain,  
To have time to pray.

Peter, John and his brother James came along.

While Jesus was praying,  
The appearance of his face changed completely,  
And his clothes became unnaturally white.

Suddenly there was Moses and Elijah,  
Standing there with him,  
Talking about what was to come.

The disciples,  
who had grown sleepy  
from the hours a prayer  
were amazed.

Peter finally blurted

“Master it is a good thing we came along.  
Let us build three dwellings,  
One for you, one for Elijah, and one for Moses.”

as he did not know how to respond.

As he was speaking a cloud surrounded them.  
A voice came from the cloud, saying

“This is my chosen one. Hear him.”

The disciples, who were thoroughly terrified,  
Threw themselves to the ground  
And would not even look up until  
Jesus came and, touching them on the shoulder, said

“Get up. Do not be afraid.”

The disciples, peering up through their fingers,  
Saw only Jesus standing there.

As they descended the mountain,  
Jesus commanded that they not tell a soul  
of what they had experienced,  
until the Messiah had been raised from the dead.

As they hiked on down the mountain,  
the disciples wondered  
what Jesus meant by raised from the dead.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the day within the church calendar where we come together to celebrate the glorious transformation of our Lord, celebrating the happy event with the first apostles as the glory of Jesus was revealed in full, hailing a triumphant reign forever.... No wait a minute. It says here that the disciples were terrified by what they saw, cowering before the awesome sight of a transformed Christ. This isn't quite it. Let's try this again....

Today is transfiguration Sunday, a day within the church calendar when we fearfully encounter the power of God unleashed, and leave charged to live a hopeful and fruitful life in the ongoing ministry of Christ, celebrating the blessings of life within the body of Christ, spreading the good word to all who care to hear... wait; that's not quite it either. Jesus commands James, John, and Peter to keep it quiet, until the rising of the Son of God from the tomb (not that they believed or understood that). Beyond that, Jesus is preparing for a life chapter that is anything but triumphant. It feels a bit too soon. Maybe another angle.

Today is the Sunday of the Transfiguration, a day where we recognize the continuity of the Godly succession of the prophetic work of God from Moses and Elijah to Jesus, recognizing with the disciples the big picture of the future that God has in store for them. This is the day where we come with the disciples to understand all that has been laid out before us. Again, this just doesn't work. There are elements of reality and the story in all of these, but here again, the disciples don't get it. They understand the whole messianic identity thing (its kind of hard to ignore a voice from a cloud after all), but they are torn by the practicalities of the moment far more than what's going on. We who have read the last chapter, and we know that what is about to happen is both triumphant, but more over terrible, nothing like the visions of power and glory that these folks seem to have in mind, arguing about who will be at the left and the right hand of a ruling Christ, wondering what Jesus means with all this suffering talk. Perhaps another approach...

Today, as we celebrate the transfiguration of Christ, we hear the story again of a powerful and wonderful display of the hand of God at work within the Scriptures. In doing this we stand with our brother and sister disciples, realizing that we really don't always know what to say, that we don't always recognize the hand of God at work in the world. We are in awe of the movement of God in this story and within our world, and seek to find a way to be faithful in our response to being invited to continue

on with Jesus. We confess, sometimes we, like them are more scared and confused than exultant and confident in our response. It is not nearly as clear or as sexy, but I think it is rather close to the truth.

The transfiguration, which is what we call this encounter on the mountain top between Jesus and these figures of the Jewish pantheon is one of those bible stories that we come to and not really sure what to do with, despite being reported by every gospel writer but John. It is one of these extraordinary Jesus is God sort of things that amaze and speak to us by way of glory and extraordinary interaction here, but not really much else. Unhappily for you all, that for me is a clue—if we find something in the Bible that doesn't quite make sense, that is usually a clue for us to take some time to work with it here. It might be easier just to edit our way around it, but there is far too little Bible for us to do that too often, so what better way than to go through it. As you have already heard, there are any number of spins to be taken on this story, none of which quite fully does the job of capturing what is going on here. This is so far out of our experience—few of us have gone up the mountain on a spiritual retreat and seen the main figures of the biblical story chatting about the weather—that there doesn't seem a whole lot of *us* at work in here. So how are we supposed to read something relevant to who and what we are into this extraordinary experience?

Perhaps that is just it. Perhaps we are so struck with the odd interactions of the prophets that we don't look at the disciples to see what they are up to. We are so drawn to the actions of Christ that we miss the actions of the disciples, and how they might connect with us. For me, that is what is compelling here. I think this story has a lot more to do with the interaction between the divine imagination and the human condition than anything else. Here we have James, John and Peter, the 3 main characters of the 12 disciples being asked off to a private prayer retreat with Jesus. We can almost see them alight with anticipation as they head out with Jesus, perhaps gloating a little bit: “Be good now, Andrew. We're going up the mountain with the master. Have a good time back here in camp...” Any image of superiority or selection of these three as spiritually or emotionally prepared for what they were to encounter was quickly dispelled within the solitude of the wilderness. They prove profoundly unequal to encountering the power of God they find there. They are presented with personas who their very up bringing and understanding of faith taught them were holy others, the primary characters of the movement of God within the people of God. And like a dog chasing a car, upon obtaining their goal, they didn't have the slightest idea what to do with the prize they have obtained.

So they fall back on that which makes sense to them. Peter suggests that they look after the night's logging for their expanded band. Or in other terms, he reaches for the first thing that pops into his mind that makes the slightest bit of sense to him, and that is the routine practicalities of the world that they know. Holy figures, clouds, and the voice of YHWH they struggle with. Shelter they can do. Help they can provide. Provision makes sense. Holy figures and the cloud of the most high does not. Its kind of like having people boil water when contractions get under way. The idea isn't so much sterilized, warm water that is needed, I wager, but some objective task that lends the distracted father the ability to feel something approaching control. Birth I have nothing to do with under its mysterious mechanisms; boiling water—doing the practical stuff that looks and feels familiar—that I can do. We are comfortable with the practical; its when all there is to sit, wait, and bear witness to working of God where we quickly lose track of things. We want to know not only that we have something to do, but that it is the right thing to do and it will stay the right thing to do, and yield the predicted results we expect. We seek the effective response, but I not sure if that is always who are called to be.

Last week, we sat with some of the big questions of Christian faith—what does it mean to love our enemies? Is there such a thing as a third way? And if so, how do we go about finding it? As our convoluted, complex, wonderful conversation indicated, these are never easy issues to wrap our heads around. We approach these questions from the very understandable position that we bring to most everything: how does this work practically; what are the practical impacts of this commandment? How do we construct a set of rules and scenarios to allow for what is being asked of us here. Just like James, Peter and John did not know what to make of the words of the one that they were following talking about dying and being raised again, neither do we. They were looking for practical reality, and what they we being asked to give was simply faithful following. That's a whole lot less clear what it means or where it takes us. It does not let us plan ahead or particularly insightfully schedule our calendar with anticipated outcomes, but it does sound a whole lot like Jesus. Jesus says follow me; follow me to Jerusalem; follow me and encounter that which you never expected to see, let alone understand. It is enough to scare us half to death, and make us inclined to simply cover our heads in fear and wonder. But it is very Jesus.

Perhaps that is what this story has to tell us. We are being invited not necessarily to do God's work for God, finding the best strategy to cleanly spread the good news in the world, declare release for the captives and all the rest and to do so on time and on budget, but rather to simply find ways to faithfully tell of what we have seen and heard and bear witness to the God who loves the world so much he gave his only son to save it in word, thought and deed. As much as we want our marching orders in clear, specific and carefully delineated terms, rarely do they come to us that way. Rather, we are told to listen, to follow, and to pray for a new way, witnessing to God's kingdom on earth as it is heaven. And that is not easy. It's not always clear. It's not particularly easy to offer pre-packaged solutions, but it is faithful.

The job of the disciples on the mountain was to encounter God among them, opening themselves to hear the voice of Jesus in the world, and to follow faithfully even to the end of their very imaginations. We are always pulled in this tension between faithful living and our desire for effective action. Sometimes, happily, they coincide. Sometimes they don't, and that is hard, be it with our enemies, or in the day to day workings of ordinary life and the people who we meet in our world. The question is always with us: what does faithfulness look like here in the situations of our world that we never expected? What does it mean to faithfully follow Jesus down the mountain and, even, toward Jerusalem, knowing what happens there.

As we begin this season of spiritual dedication in Lent, it is my hope that we each might find ways to listen, encountering the divine in this time of reflection and growth, becoming motivated within and inspired by the energizing imagination of God with us. We have the promise of God's presence with us, we are called to realize that presence, and hear the voice of God at work in our lives. May this time of walking the road to Jerusalem yet again allow you time to abide with God, hearing the voice of YHWH, and being moved by the divine imagination that holds us all in its tender care. And may we be given the courage even here to follow faithfully where the master leads. Amen.