

## **RUNNYMEDE UNITED CHURCH**

### ***Sunday of the Transfiguration***

February 14, 2010

### ***'This High and Holy Place'***

*Exodus 34: 29-35; Luke 9: 28-36*

This week, I read a story about a man longing to encounter God: The man whispered, 'God, speak to me!' and a meadowlark sang. But the man did not hear. The man shouted: 'God, speak to me!' Thunder rolled across the sky. But the man did not listen. The man looked around and said, 'God, let me see you.' A star shone brightly. But the man did not notice. The man shouted, 'God, show me a miracle!' A life was born. But the man did not know. So, the man cried out in despair: 'Touch me, God; let me know you are here!' Whereupon, God reached out and touched him. But, the man brushed the butterfly away and walked off...

Do I sometimes miss the blessing of God's presence because it's not packaged as I expect? Are you sometimes too distracted to be aware when you encounter the Holy?

Perhaps today's texts are partly responsible, depicting encounters with God's glory as defining moments. The story of the transfiguration of Jesus concludes the season of Epiphany, and sends us into Lent, carrying, perhaps, a deep yearning for what some call 'a mountaintop experience': events amazing enough to lift us, in poet John Magee's metaphor beyond 'the surly bonds of earth', beyond, perhaps, even an Olympic pinnacle. This story reminds us that one of the reasons we gather in worship may be a longing for moments radiant with light and clarity, encounters with God.

Today, Transfiguration Sunday, describes such a mountaintop experience. As the Olympics begin, and we worship on a holiday weekend devoted to family, on a day that celebrates love, we know, perhaps better than we wish, that such dazzling times are also times touched by horror, fear, sadness. No wonder it's hard to see the butterfly.

Yet, today, remembering God's light shining in the face of a transfigured Moses and of Jesus Christ, whose glory dumbfounds his disciples, can we remember that seeking an encounter with the holy is why we come to this place? How do we keep from duplicating the disciples, overcome by sleep, or the man brushing away the butterfly and walking off? What is Transfiguration?

Luke begins with Jesus' wish to pray. Wishing not to pray alone, perhaps, he took Peter, James and John, to climb to the top of a mountain. Why? Is it not in stories set in such 'high and holy places' that one encounters the classic biblical symbols of God's mysterious, almost unknowable, presence: bright light, visions and voices from beyond? Scholars sometimes bring their debates into such arenas: Is it Mt. Tabor or Mt. Hermon? Is this legend or history? But what happens when we come face to face with a story like this, dealing with the mystery at the core of life?

Consider the disciples' response to their confused sense of the holy before them. In the wake of such transcendence, they suggest: 'Let us make three dwellings: one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah.'

They're still on the mountain, and wondering how they can 'package' an overwhelming experience by erecting a shrine. Some would call this the 'edifice' complex: confusing church with the building rather than the people; taking the mystery out of the mystical, making it all 'user friendly'. That's fine, as long as the capacity of the holy to startle, inspire, transform is not lost. We must not, cannot, confine God's epiphany. But we can celebrate it.

Next week, as Lent begins, you gather to vote on a budget for 2010, looking back to the year past and forward to the year ahead. What a place to encounter God! I mean it! Within the budget lie commitment to community, a vision for the body of Christ here and now, a desire to be present in the world as those who work, serve, love, as you do providing food and clothes at the Community Meal. That budget paints those who hear God's voice in music, who reach out to people in Haiti, in Kenya, in other parts of the world, with care and compassion, who are committed to caring for God's holy earth, who advocate ending child poverty and human trafficking, who laugh, weep and eat together, who worship with Alzheimer's patients, holding hands when memory's grip brings tears, who visit the ill and sorrowful, who help children interpret Bible stories, who gather with youth to consider faith and caring, who pray together, who support the United Church's Mission and Service Fund. Budget lines paint a picture of this community's willingness to see the face of Christ in people they meet in all those ways and more, to be dazzled by the love they sense, there.

Is that meeting a high and holy place?

Picture Moses coming down the mountain to stride down this aisle, oblivious to people's stares, his face shining with what some have called 'God-burn', one arm brandishing an Annual Report, the other, The Ten Commandments. 'God is here', he says, pointing to one and then the other.

As you consider ministry and mission, picture God's radiant love filling Jesus with holy light, and hear, from an overshadowing cloud, the voice: *This is my Son, my chosen. Listen to him.*

To be dazzled or to be silenced? Luke's closing says of the disciples: 'And they kept silent, and in those days told no one of the things they had seen.' Why silence? Perhaps they fear rejection: "People will call me crazy – what will they think if I..."

In your budget, find commitment to nurture spirituality with prayer and action. Find hope, 'assurance that our faith is not in vain' (VU # 104).

The power moving us from life in which we cannot recognize God's presence to life grazed by a butterfly's wings, grounded in generosity and love, is the power that dazzled onlookers on the mountain top, that still dazzles us. Here is the power of love in action. Be dazzled this day, by the fullness of wisdom and grace Christ offers those who follow as he descends from the mountain peak into the valley to meet the pain and possibility of ordinary human life.

In the midst of overcrowded schedules, struggling to keep commitments, attend meetings, all the mess of making a living and getting along, while celebrating family, love and the Olympic story, this narrative of transfiguration can help connect your life with God's glory. It's about belonging to a community that believes in being transformed and transforming others, in encountering the holy.

Some tell us that people in a postmodern world have little interest in a God who only promises a future kingdom. They hunger for a God who can dazzle them in the here and now - which brings us back to Transfiguration! For, here is the ancient story of how earth and heaven intersect, and the humbling truth that we cannot claim to have a handle on the holy: but we can open ourselves to God's presence: that, as we will sing, "our daily lives may prove us people of the God we bless".

The disciples kept silence, telling no one, then. But later, after the resurrection, they told this story because they understood it was not just another story, but something more. Amidst all the stories about what Jesus does, Transfiguration is a story which speaks of who Jesus is. The early church told this story to affirm Jesus' identity: one with Moses, the law-giver and Elijah, the spirit-filled prophet, One whose presence dazzled them, even as they carried the cross, into realizing that Jesus was God's chosen. '*Listen to him.*' How do we listen, today?

Where do you see God moving? Where do you recognize the face of Christ?

Luke's Story begins with Jesus' wish to pray – but below the mountain peak, in shadow and wilderness, the world waits. Pain, despair, longing are there. There, too, God is, connecting us not only to light but also to need and struggle and love. That is why, on this grey day of family and re-creation, even as the light of the mountaintop dazzles, we turn, perhaps reluctantly, toward the shadows of Lent. As we do, may the cloud of God's presence stay with us, grazing us, as with a butterfly's wings. Amen.

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