



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
February 14, 2021

Gathering Around God’s Word

If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together. (If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At- Home Worship service, please email Brooke office@wpceugene.org)

CALL TO WORSHIP

The glory of God shines like a consuming fire.

We have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The voice of God thunders like a mighty storm.

Out of the cloud, God speaks: This is my beloved Son; listen to him!

OPENING HYMN

I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art

#624

CALL TO CONFESSION

God alone is righteous; God alone is perfect. Yet this holy, righteous God comes to us in love, to save us.

Rejoicing in God’s grace, let us confess our sin.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God of all glory, we have tried to hide from you, yet you have never hidden your love for us. We have tried to search for you, yet you have already revealed yourself to us in the face of Jesus Christ. Forgive us, transform us, so that our lives may shine with your glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Our God speaks to us with grace and love, saying, You are my beloved child. This is the good news of the gospel: in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Speak to us, O God, and let the fire of your Spirit burn brightly in our hearts. Open our minds to receive the wisdom of the law, the hope of the prophets, and the life of the gospel. Jesus Christ, your living Word. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 50:1-6

The mighty one, God the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes and does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around him. He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: "Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!" The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge.

New Testament Reading: Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

ANTHEM

There is a Redeemer

Elizabeth Dhungana

SERMON

"Living with the Mystery"

Rev. David Ukropina

This Sunday is Transfiguration Sunday, and if you've been coming to church for a while, it's a Sunday and a theme and a Bible passage that you've heard before. Whichever version we read from, we hear about how Jesus took Peter and James and John up a high mountain, where he was transfigured before them.

And if you've heard this text preached on many times, then you know there are a lot of different things we could focus on. I've preached on this passage a number of times myself, and each time, I've focused on different parts of the narrative so as to avoid repeating myself, sermon after sermon.

The first time I preached on the Transfiguration, I focused more on the transcendent vision, high on top of the mountain, and how it affects our lives. The next time, I talked more about taking that vision back down to the valley, and how to hang on to it there. The third time, I tried to blend the two, in talking about how mountaintop transcendence and daily living in the valley interact with one another.

Looking back on those sermons has reminded me of the ground I've walked before, and led me to again look at a slightly different angle of the story, given how inexhaustible the passage and the theme of Transfiguration are for us and for our lives. This time, I'd like to focus more on the theme of mystery itself, and how so much of our experience is beyond our ultimate comprehension.

Many preachers and pastors and commentators have talked about the challenge and difficulty of preaching on this text. I share that opinion, and I think there are a number of reasons why. First of all, the nature of transcendence and mystery are just inherently beyond our ability to adequately describe or put into words.

Another issue with this passage itself is that it exists in a kind of boundary zone between the human the divine. The subject, and especially the experience of Peter, James and John, happens in a kind of meeting point

between earth and heaven. While we can be grateful for the way Jesus serves as a point of contact between heaven and earth, there remains a kind of baffling nature to this event.

It's interesting that Mark the gospel writer also places this story between other stories that have to do with seeing or with blindness. Just before this chapter, in chapter 8, there is the healing of a blind man in Bethsaida, and in other parts of the gospel, there are stories about the blindness of the disciples and those hearing but failing to see who Jesus is.

We ourselves are left in a kind of mysterious place with the text. Even as believers in Christ, we can be left wondering what exactly happened on the mountain top. We can find ourselves asking questions like, Was the sun just shining at a particular angle? How exactly did Jesus look dazzling white? How were Elijah and Moses there, and how did they appear?

It's always been interesting to me the way that Peter reacts. We read that he wanted to make three dwelling places, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. Commentators have mentioned about how it seems that Peter is trying to take something transcendent and mysterious and turn it into something literal and concrete.

We read right after this that Peter did not know what to say, for he and the other disciples were terrified. We read similar language at the end of Mark's gospel, when the disciples flee the empty tomb in terror. There certainly is a connection between the transfiguration and resurrection, but Peter's desire to make a concrete dwelling place reminds me of how being terrified often leads people to try to turn uncertainty into concreteness and literalness, rather than just resting in mystery and transcendence.

Back when we were in seminary, I remember how often we talked about the way that transcendence and the ultimate nature of God were so far beyond us, and our ability to fully comprehend the nature of God, and the way that our language was ultimately insufficient to completely sum up either the nature of God or the nature of reality.

In our theology classes, we talked about something called analogical language. You can hear the word analogy in analogical language, and the basic idea is that when talking about theology, or anything else in human experience, our words function as analogy. That is, we can say some things that are true. Our words are not completely useless, but we can never fully capture the nature of reality or of God.

In seminary, we talked about this with Bible passages as well. Think of the famous passage early in Genesis when God is with Adam and Eve, and God tells them they may eat from any tree in the garden, but that they must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. What that tells me, in a way, is that there is a boundary and a limit to what we can ultimately know.

It's been said that the original sin of humanity is that the creature, namely us, wants to be the creator, namely God. When the creature wants to change places with the creator, it is like we humans want to go beyond the boundary of what we can know, and switch places with God, and yet that is a boundary we just cannot go beyond.

And yet there are times and places where we can feel the distance between us and God to be maybe a little bit less than usual. Christians and theologians have sometimes referred to these as liminal spaces or liminal experiences, where the boundaries between us and God seem to be thinner than usual.

This seems to be an appropriate passage and an appropriate theme for the particular place where we are in the liturgical calendar. On this transfiguration Sunday, we are right between Epiphany and the beginning of Lent. You can see this in the change of our liturgical colors from the green of last Sunday to the white of this Sunday and then the purple at the start of Lent.

As for how this affects us, it leaves me wondering if we are able to leave room in our lives for visions we can never fully explain. Can we live with the mystery, rather than trying to explain it away, or like Peter, try to turn it into something literal and tangible, just to make ourselves more comfortable, and perhaps less terrified.

I'm reminded of a passage in the wonderful book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard. Dillard won the Pulitzer Prize with this book, where she documented her observations and theological reflections while

observing the natural area she lived near in Virginia, which included the small Tinker Creek.

At one point in the book, she describes the experience of a young girl who was born blind, but had a surgery to cure her blindness. The text reads, “When her doctor took her bandages off and led her into the garden, the girl who was no longer blind saw “the tree with the lights in it.”

Dillard continues to write, “It was for this tree I searched through the peach orchards for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the morning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance.

The flood of fire abated, but I’m still spending the power. Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. I have since only very rarely seen the tree with the lights in it. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it.” (p 33-34)

As I think about how the Transfiguration and mystery and transcendence affect us in our lives, I think first of all and most of all about humility. The way that God and nature and reality are ultimately beyond our comprehension is an inherent argument for us staying humble, and a guard against arrogance.

We live in an amazing age when science and technology can explain so much that was once mysterious and beyond us, that we can end up arrogant. While I’m all for the advance of science and the benefits it brings us, we need to protect ourselves against becoming so certain about everything, as if we knew and understood all there is to know.

For example, yes, we can explain in a scientific way how light reaches us from the sun, but having done so, do we really, fully understand and comprehend it. Or we can explain, in scientific terms, how babies are born, but having done that, have we really captured the mystery and awesomeness of child birth? Ultimately, it’s just beyond us.

In this charged political season, it seems to me that there is quite a bit of arrogance in many areas of discourse. Perhaps like Peter, we run from our rampant anxiety towards perceived certainties that make us feel better. And so liberals can be left certain they have all the answers and conservative can be certain they have all the answers, when what we all need, liberal, conservative or moderate, is some perspective and some humility.

I’ve mentioned this before, but one of my favorite comic strips from Peanuts has Charlie Brown asking Snoopy, I hear you’re writing a book on theology. I hope you have a good title? In response, Snoopy says, I have the perfect title, and then he writes, “Has it ever occurred to you that you might be wrong?”

I’ve noticed the way that many churches and many Christians go around way too sure of themselves, as if they have the truth all sewn up. It leaves me thinking that we all need to be more reverent to the mystery, especially as we are heading into the season of Lent, which is a time of reflection and contemplation of the ultimate mystery of God in Jesus Christ.

As we travel to the cross, let us remember to not be so sure and certain of everything. Of course, we can be sure and certain of the resurrection and of the love that God has for us, but let us not be so sure of our own words and comprehension, laden as they are with human failing and finitude.

We can ask the question, what does the Transfiguration want to accomplish for us? The Lenten season should be a way out of comfort and certainty and complacency, and a time to reflect on the transcendent mystery of the cross, the passion, and the glorious victory over sin and death on Easter Sunday. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH - NICENE CREED

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things

were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Responding to God's Word

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Loving God, you have come to us in glory, and we now come to you in prayer.

We pray for your creation. Help us to end the damage we are causing, and restore the beauty of this world...

We pray for the body of Christ. Open our hearts in faith, and enlighten our minds with the knowledge of you...

We pray for people of all nations. Give the people your blessing of peace...

We pray for your comfort for those who are suffering...

We pray for those around us. Bless our families, friends and neighbors. Help them in their trouble, and be near them when they are afraid...

Holy God, make us ready for the day when this world is transfigured and made new, when all things shine in your glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray...

Our Father who 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 debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending of God's Word

CLOSING HYMN

Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise

#12

BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.

-Genesis, 31:49