**HALF-TIME REPORT**

February 26, 2017

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 24:12, 15-18

2 Peter 1:16-2

Matthew 17:1-9

Psalm 148

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artha and I were in the air, flying to Florida for five days on February 4 when the Super Bowl was being played between the Atlanta Falcons and the New England Patriots this year. I had decided that since the Pittsburgh Steelers weren’t playing, I could afford to miss this game and take advantage of cheaper seats on the plane since most folks would not elect to fly during the game. Our route South took us to Chicago where we had a bit of a layover. As we were beginning to taxi out to the runway, I got a bit of a half-time report. Several Patriot’s fans who were interviewed had briefly shifted their attention to the half-time show with Lady Gaga, and away with the stunned performance of the Patriots.

Indeed, the game seemed almost over at halftime. The Falcons led 21-0 late in the second quarter and 28-9 to start the 4th quarter, and they were ahead 28-20 at the two-minute warning. The game was still happening when Gerry and Karen picked up Martha and me at the Ft. Myers airport. Gerry, grew up in Boston and as an ardent fan, had the game on his radio. The car became silent as we listened to the Patriot’s march the ball to a touchdown that would tie the game and send it into overtime.

As you well know, not only did the Patriots overcome the largest deficit in Super Bowl history, they played in the first overtime game in Super Bowl History and if I had been wagering and playing the odds at half-time, my money would not have been in New England, but it would have been with Atlanta . . . but what do I know?

This seems far-fetched from Transfiguration Sunday, but on this day, the Sunday before the beginning of Lent, we get a half-time report from the middle of the gospel of Matthew. And it seems as though Jesus’ ministry is not faring well. The transfiguration occurs in a season of gloom. Jesus has been labeled a blasphemer, accused of demon possession, doubted by his friend and colleague in kingdom work John the Baptist, rejected by his hometown to the point that he stopped doing ministry there, resisted by the very people he came to serve and save, and is the subject of murder plots that will, of course, finally be successful.

In short, Jesus is plummeting rapidly toward the cross, and it is precisely at this moment of woe that he is transfigured. In a theological master stroke of timing, it is now -- on this stretch of pathway through the valley of the shadow -- that the transfiguration account calls us to remember Jesus' baptism and to anticipate his resurrection. As the storm clouds gather overhead, we hear from the skies the very same words we heard at the very beginning of his ministry, when John baptized him, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). As the canvas of Jesus' life becomes fouled with the dark colors of death, here for a moment, he shines in splendor and unrivaled glory.

In other words, the placement of the account of the transfiguration is not a mistake in timing. It is a propitious and gripping promise of hope. Just when the mounting failure of Jesus' ministry threatens to cloud our vision with doubt -- to provoke us to wonder, like John the Baptist, if Jesus is indeed the one we have been waiting for or whether we should look elsewhere to satisfy our deepest hopes (Matthew 11:3) -- the curtains part for an instant, and we see who this Jesus truly is. "This is my Son," the heavenly voice reveals, "my beloved child, the one with whom I am well-pleased. He was my beloved Son at his baptism; he is still my beloved Son in the teeth of human rejection; and he will be my beloved Son in glory." As one creed puts it, "He was Lord at the beginning. He will be Lord at the end. Even now, Jesus is Lord."

In the main, then, the story of the transfiguration is a means of seeing -- who Jesus is right at the point that the deteriorating circumstances of his life and ministry threaten to obscure his identity. The transfiguration urges us not to be misled by the pain and the rejection of the present; this Jesus is, appearances to the contrary, the cherished Son of God.

But the transfiguration story is more. Because it is a way of seeing the truth about Jesus Christ, it is also a lens through which we may see the truth about ourselves and others. This story gives us what can be called the gift of "transfiguration discernment." Just as recognizing the identity of Jesus required a parting of the curtain so that the blessing of the baptismal past and the glory of the resurrection future could shimmer through the gloom of the present, the same is true when Christians seek to understand themselves and others. To see who people really are requires more than a calculus of their present circumstances; we must view them with "transfiguration discernment," seeing them in the light of baptism and resurrection, the beginning and the end. As we muck it through in the mud and mire of the present, we are called to see people not only as they are but also as they were at the dawn of God's creation and as they will be in the triumph of God's future.

To become a pastor in most Christian denominations, a candidate for ordination is normally examined and tested theologically. The church has a right and an obligation to know if a person is theologically sound before authorizing ordination, so theological questions are asked. I recall an older and much experienced pastor who when candidates were examined on the floor of presbytery usually asked the same theological question of every candidate for nearly 30 years. Sometimes the committee on ministry would warn candidates to be prepared for this fellow and the warning was nearly prophetic.

He began by asking the candidate to look out the window. If the church had stained glass windows and you couldn’t see out, this questioner was dead in the water, but usually the examinee peered out the window, and the seasoned said, "Tell me when you see a person out there."

"I see one," the candidate will haltingly announce.

"Do you know that individual personally?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Now, my question is this: Will you please describe that person theologically?"

In three decades of experience in asking that question, the seasoned minister has found that candidates tended to give one of two different answers. Some will say something like, "That person is a sinner in need of the redemption of Jesus Christ." Others, however, will respond, "Whether they know it or not, that person is a child of God, loved and upheld by the grace of God in Jesus Christ."

He would say, “Thank you for your answer. I appreciate it very much.”

So, at lunch one day, I asked him, “Why do you always ask that question, what are you seeking? I hope that you aren’t trying to intimidate candidates.”

Then in an undaunted way he said, "I suppose that, technically, both answers are theologically correct. But it is my experience that those who give the second answer make the better pastors.” I have thought to ask that same question sometimes, but never have. But from time to time, I reflect on it, especially when I watch someone being examined before the presbytery.

Why did he think that the second answer was somehow evidence of a better pastor? Well, I have concluded that he perceived that those who answered this way had the gift of "transfiguration discernment." They could see people in the present tense, in the middle of their circumstances, but they were also able to see more than just the present. They also saw others as they might have been born, all newly minted and innocent and how they might become - a beloved child of God who is yet to be fashioned by joy and pain and suffering and triumph.

About 33 Februarys ago, something significant happened. Ronald Reagan was president, spearheading then the fight against communism. He told a story about a collective farm in the Soviet Union, one in which a state commissar grabbed a farm worker and said, “Comrade, how are the crops?”

“Oh,” said the farm worker, “Comrade Commissar, if we could put the potatoes in one pile, they would reach the foot of God.”

The commissar corrected him, “This is the Soviet Union, comrade. There is no God.”

“That’s all right,” said the farm worker, “there are no potatoes.”

That was the joke that President Regan told that day, but that is not what was significant about that February day. No, on that day, February 3, 1983 after telling that story, he proclaimed 1983 to be “The Year of the Bible.”

Okay, so we don’t remember that.  1983 — The Year of the Bible.
1983. It was a very good year. It’s remembered for the final episode of the television series M\*A\*S\*H, which ended after 11 years and 251 episodes. It was the same year that Sally Ride became the first American woman in space, and the Soviet Union shot down Korean Air Flight 007. And it was the year that Microsoft Word was first released. But 1983 as The Year of the Bible? Most of us probably don’t remember that.

President Reagan’s proclamation said, in part, “Today our beloved America and, indeed, the world, is facing a decade of enormous challenge. As a people, we may well be tested as we have seldom, if ever, been tested before.”

He went on to say, “We will need resources of spirit even more than resources of technology, education and armaments. There could be no more fitting moment than now to reflect with gratitude, humility and urgency upon the wisdom revealed to us in the writing that Abraham Lincoln called ‘the best gift God has ever given to man … But for it, we could not know right from wrong.’”

The Year of the Bible came and went, and few people — if any — remember it. But we still need the “resources of spirit even more than resources of technology.” The Bible remains one of God’s greatest gifts to us, revealing the Lord’s will and showing us what is right and wrong. It’s a book that should be approached with gratitude, humility and urgency … not just one year, but every year.

I thought to myself, this morning’s passage in Exodus is placed here in the lectionary to remind us of who Moses is and why he was such a significant figure to have appeared with Jesus on that mountain the day Jesus was transfigured. Basically, the Exodus passage tells us how God instructed Moses to “take two tablets” — the Ten Commandments. Moses went up Mount Sinai, into a cloud that contained the glory of the Lord, and received the gift of these two tablets. But he soon discovered that the laws of God can be a hard pill for people to swallow. Like giving a horse pill to a kid. Ain’t going to happen.

The giving of the commandments had occurred earlier in the book of Exodus, chapter 20, but it was so significant that the story needed to be retold. These laws were delivered in a terrifying pyrotechnic display of thunder and lightning and smoke. This sound-and-light, shock-and-awe show caused the people of Israel to tremble and stand at a distance, and they said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die” (Exodus 20:19).

Surely the disciples who were on that mountain with Jesus and they knew about the event with Moses. It was sort of like déjà vu all over again. This time God’s hope was that his laws of forgiving grace and love . . . a law that we are to love God with our who heart and our neighbor as ourselves would be written on our hearts more than on tablets of stone.

On this Transfiguration Sunday, we have come to that mountain in scripture again. New perspectives seem to touch us when we have mountain top experiences with God.

"Attitude determines Altitude" was a mantra of my basketball coach Earl Zinkham. He thought it applied to the county league standings, to rebounding, to every aspect of life. One day before practice he said, "Gentlemen, attitude determines altitude. If you plan to move ahead in life, be it in basketball or anything else, your attitude will have more to do with your success than your physical ability, your brain power, or the home from which you've come."[[1]](#footnote-1)

I thought about coach Zinkham's words while taking exams, when leaving home, and sometimes on Sunday mornings when I drive to the church. Attitude determines altitude. This morning’s Bible encounter has us mountain climbing with Jesus and the disciples and their transforming experience with the hope that we will have one, too.

Years later, Peter would write about it in a letter,

*"For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain."*[[2]](#footnote-2)

The entire adventure on the mountain had become so significant, that Peter was changed by it. Just as the blinding light on the road to Damascus forever altered Saul of Tarsus, so the light on the mountain that day, transformed Peter. He would never be the same. He would no longer follow any cleverly devised myth, but would try to explain the power and majesty of God in Christ Jesus. Those who have been with Jesus during such a mountain experience discover that altitude can determine attitude. Of course, Peter wasn’t perfect. As we come toward the end of Lent, we will see how his faith was challenged and he lost his spiritual footing, but after the resurrection he regained it. Whether Peter knew it or not, Jesus saw him, like he did so many others, as a child of God, loved and upheld by grace, that would ultimately transform him.

Matthew’s gospel was written to convince his own people that Jesus was the new Moses. Moses led his people from bondage, through the Red Sea, across the wilderness to the Promised Land.

Matthew writes that Jesus is greater than Moses. Jesus leads the new Israel through the baptismal waters from bondage of sin to freedom in Christ.

I once sat on a plane waiting for take-off. I was in 14D – beside a woman in 14E. From her dress, I sensed a humility about her. I had shined my shoes before leaving and had a book I hoped to read. She was surrounded by sacks and bundles.

It was obvious she had never been on a plane before. "I don't do this much," she grinned. "Do you?" I said, “Not too often, just once and a while.” "Oh, that must be a lot of fun." Inwardly, I groaned a bit. I was hoping to read.

She volunteered that she was going to Albuquerque to see her son. She filled in all the blanks - the boy had the flu, he had a black Lab, the dog's name was Wilbur. As the plane climbed, she looked out the window. "Oooooh - look at the trees; they look just like peat moss." People turned around in their seats and stared.

The flight attendant came by asking what we’d like to drink. I asked for a cup of coffee even though I have this standard rule about life that says, “Drinking coffee on board aircraft causes turbulence.” She asked about all the choices a second and then a third time. She decided on a diet coke and I passed the pretzels to her, which she returned for the mini-cookies, what were returned for the peanuts which were returned for the pretzels again. The fellow behind us ordered two drinks at a time. I opened my book and tried to read, when it occurred to me that this woman beside me might be the only person on the whole plane enjoying this trip.

When we landed in Albuquerque and she turned and said: "Now, wasn't that a fun trip?" And as I watched her head down the aisle and leave the plane, it hit me, “Why had she enjoyed the whole trip from beginning to end while I had endured it?

In Matthew 17 Jesus took three disciples up to the top of a mountain. It was half time in Jesus' journey. The clouds were hanging low over his ministry. The Pharisees and Sadducees were making it increasingly difficult for him. His disciples bickered continually. And he began to talk to them about suffering, Jerusalem, and the cross. He talked about saving one's life by losing it. And then Jesus took the leaders of the disciple band, Peter, James, and John, away from the others. He led them up to the winding hill to the top of Mount Hermon, and there on the mountaintop something happened. We're not sure what occurred, but something changed. We do know Moses and Elijah appeared. Jesus' face shone in a way they had never seen it. His garments glistened and it hurt their eyes. And God spoke, saying, as he did at Jesus' baptism: "This is my beloved son . . . Do not be afraid." This encounter turned them inside out. It changed their lives and they were never quite the same ever again. Simon Peter wanted to stay there forever. But Jesus shook his head. The vision faded. Moses and Elijah left as quickly as they came. And Jesus and the three disciples made the winding trip back down the mountain.

Jesus called this experience a vision in verse nine. Scholars would later describe this occasion as a theophany - a visitation from God. And the disciples would tell repeatedly about that day, that special day when God came down and they beheld his glory. But maybe you're wondering what this story of Jesus being transfigured has to do with the woman on the plane.

**There comes a time when we should disengage**. From time to time we should quit being busy and just stop, look, and listen - quit our doing and just stand there. That's a hard thing for most of us. We think we should be doing something.

Have you seen the T-shirt that says: "Jesus is coming back - Look Busy.”? The pastor on that plane missed the journey because he was immersed in his own stuff. The woman could focus on the moment. The reason Jesus took his disciples with him to that quiet place of disengagement was to prepare them to understand the crucifixion and all that would follow.

Robert Fulghum writes about a woman who was so stressed out she went to see a psychiatrist. After listening to her a long time, he wrote out a prescription and handed it to her. She read the words the doctor had written: "Spend one hour on Sunday watching the sunrise while walking in a cemetery." Against her better judgment, she followed the advice. One morning as the sun came up, she stood in a cemetery listening to the birds and watching the world come alive all around her. She found herself in touch with her life again.

**We are to open our eyes**. The woman on the plane saw. The man sitting beside her missed the whole experience. After the experience on Mount Hermon the disciples told others that their eyes were opened. They had seen things they never saw before.

The story in Matthew this morning reminds us that we can’t stay up having mountain top experiences indefinitely. Reality intrudes. Visions, unfortunately, do not last. There are just enough mountain peaks to get us through the lonesome valleys. We can't stay on an emotional high forever.

As quickly as it came, the vision faded. Moses and Elijah disappeared. Had they been part of some great and holy moment or was this only a dream? Peter wanted to build three booths--one for Christ, one for Moses and one for Elijah--and stay there on that mountain. We can appreciate that. What a grand experience.

It is so easy to delude ourselves that by coming to worship once a week, we have fulfilled our commitment to Christ. Worship is where we prepare ourselves for service outside these walls.

In 2001, Allison Levine led the first all-woman team to climb Mt. Everest. Allison is a particularly inspiring leader, because for much of her life she was unable to take on any physical challenges. Born with a heart defect, Allison never played sports or rough-housed like other kids her age. Any exertion could cause her heart to jump out of its regular rhythm. At the age of 30, Allison underwent surgery to repair her heart defect. Afterwards, she became a dedicated athlete.

Allison agreed to lead the Mt. Everest expedition with one stipulation: that the climb would be a fund-raising effort to raise money for good causes, like cancer research and for building girls’ schools in Nepal. She didn’t want to climb Everest for her own or the team’s glory; she wanted the team to give back something to those less fortunate. As Allison Levine said, “What’s the point of taking such risks if nothing changes on the earth below.”

You or I could not have said it better. What’s the use of climbing mountains if when we come down we are still the same self-absorbed people we were when we went up? Christ is calling us to leave worship committed to living a life of service. He does not call us to come out of the world but to serve the world.

The time spent on the mountain was a time of discovery for the disciples. It was a time of worship--a time of meeting God. At that altitude, they gained a new attitude of wonder and purpose. But, after the meeting was over, though, it was time for the service to begin. So, it is with us.

**Commentary on Matthew 17**

The story of the Transfiguration happens six days after Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ and Jesus explains what cost the Son of Man will bear (16:13-28). The action in 17:1-9 opens with Jesus leading Peter, James and John up a high mountain (v. 1). The only other place where Matthew describes a mountain as being high is in the story of Jesus' temptation (4:8). Something extraordinary should be anticipated from the get-go.

When Jesus is transfigured (v. 2), his face shines like the sun. Here, "transfigured" is translated from  Jesus undergoes a metamorphosis. Biblically and theologically, metamorphosis has to do with God's transforming purposes, not human longings or wishful thinking about making changes in one's life. Such divine power is substantiated by Matthew's description of Jesus' face that, like the sun, is generating its own light, not reflecting it. Further reinforcing the sacredness of the moment is the sudden appearance of Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus (v. 3), which clearly places Jesus in the prophetic tradition and the movement of the Spirit associated with that tradition.

Peter's response to this manifestation of the holy is first to observe how good it is that he and the other disciples are present, then to offer to make three dwellings (v. 4). But as Peter is speaking, a bright cloud overshadows them, and from the cloud a voice declares: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (v. 5). Note here how the cloud places the disciples in shadow while Jesus is still shining and how the announcement from the cloud renders Peter's response to the vision superfluous, if not meaningless altogether.

The disciples' subsequent terror (v. 6) is matched by Jesus telling them not to be afraid (v. 7), a standard assurance throughout the Bible to those who are trembling in the presence of the Divine. Once Jesus is alone again with the disciples (v. 8), he orders them not to speak about the vision they've witnessed until after the resurrection.

Matthew 17:1-9 is a pivotal passage. Both the transfigured Jesus and his order that the disciples delay talking about the vision point forward to the risen Jesus. At the same time, the voice from the cloud calling Jesus the Beloved Son points back to the same voice and message heard from heaven when Jesus emerges from his baptism (3:17). By making a narrative connection to both Jesus being baptized and rising from the dead, Matthew 17:1-9 serves as a crucial link underscoring the unity of Jesus' public ministry, passion, crucifixion and resurrection. It also provides an important point of transition in the unfolding of Jesus' earthly mission. Similar to the way Jesus' baptism inaugurates his public ministry, the Transfiguration marks the heightening of the stakes in his ministry, leading to the cross and empty tomb. No wonder Transfiguration Sunday concludes the season of Epiphany and prepares for the commencement of Lent.

In light of the pivotal nature of 17:1-9 and the heightening of the stakes it conveys, it's worth giving Peter's response in verse 4 further scrutiny. One might well expect that the metamorphosis of a radiant Jesus flanked by Moses and Elijah -- back from the dead -- would stun a witness into gaping silence. Not Peter. His first reaction is to start talking about doing something and, for that matter, to do so with a fairly inflated view of his own importance. Notice how after claiming "it is good for us to be here," Peter says, "I will make three dwellings."

Peter wants to build a memorial that preserves the memory of this divine event. Memory, of course, is a profound dimension of how faith stays alive throughout Scripture. But the currency of memory is valuable only to the extent that looking back bolsters our awareness that God is in our midst right here and now, not stuck in the past. Memorials serve us best when they keep us currently faithful to our ever-present God, who's always leading us into the future.

The problem with memorials, however, is how, despite our best intentions, they can devolve into tidy keepsake boxes that preserve holiness like some memento to which we can return at our convenience. Here, the Divine is treated like a commodity.

Yet the voice from the cloud proclaims: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Thus, God answers Peter -- and all like Peter -- whenever they respond to the holy as if they know how to domesticate the Divine and manage the presence of the living God. First, be still long enough to listen to the One with whom God is well pleased, the only One who knows what is up and needful heading into the future that God holds in store. Before going into action, be still long enough not only to listen but also to reflect the glory of this One. Such glory isn't an entitlement to privilege for the disciples but the source of sacred empowerment from on high. It energizes and equips them anew to accompany Jesus throughout the intensification of his ministry.

The instruction from the cloud to listen to Jesus isn't so much a rebuke as an encouragement to recognize and follow the One who best exemplifies what it means to be a beloved child of God who knows and carries out what pleases God. God doesn't need us to build memorials but to be memorials: living memorials who reflect Christ in how we conduct our lives, now and moving into the future. Here, the disciples in the story as well as the disciples reading the story learn the importance of being attentive enough to comprehend who God empowers us to be. Only then can we begin to get a handle on what God empowers us to do.

1. Borrowed from a sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Boak on Sunday, February 21, 1993 at Christ Presbyterian Church, Canton, Ohio [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2 Peter 1:16-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)