

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Rev. Howard K. Bell  
Sunday, February 7, 2016  
*The Power of Community*

Both of our scripture texts today are stories of transfiguration. They have several elements in common. The first is that we are told that God appears in a mystical way. In Exodus, God appears to Moses as the burning bush. In Luke, it is the appearance of the long-dead prophets, Moses and Elijah, who appear mystically. A difference in these two texts is that God communicates with Moses by writing the Ten Commandments on the stone tablets; whereas in Luke the prophets are engaged in conversation with Jesus about his impending departure and what he is to accomplish in Jerusalem. In the Luke text, we also mystically hear God's voice saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" (Luke 9: 35b)

The second common element in both of today's texts is that there is a physical transfiguration that occurs and the transfiguration is visible to others. For Moses, it was that his face shone in a way that caused Aaron and all the Israelites to be afraid. It even required that Moses wear a veil to protect those who looked upon him from the brightness of his face. In the Luke text not only are we told that the image of Moses and Elijah was visible to the three apostles who accompanied Jesus up the mountain, but we are also told that the appearance of Jesus' face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Finally, the third common element of our two texts is that transfigured persons – Moses in Exodus, and Jesus in Luke - come down off the mountaintop where their mission must be lived out – among those in need in the world, and not on the mountaintop with God's presence and separated from God's creation.

So what do we make today, of these mystical appearances of God, of these transfigurations, and of the mission God is calling us to fulfill down off the mountaintop?

In regard to mystical experiences, I have shared with you previously about the experience I had in a nighttime dream. In that dream I had many of the elements that are reported by persons who have near-death experiences: being out of body, experiencing judgment, moving through time and space, seeing a light that can only be described as "unconditional love" and then returning to one's body to live out life in a different way – transformed if not transfigured. Even though I do not necessarily believe that near-death experiences prove that persons will inevitably go through these experiences at the time of death, I do believe they are evidence of mystical aspects to life that point to the presence of God in life. Therefore, I believe in these Biblical accounts of transfiguration in a similar way – evidence that God has appeared to humankind in mystical ways and I am open to God appearing again in mystical ways today and into the future.

Speaking of the mystical, I also want to note that today we will celebrate communion. As Christians who belong to the United Church of Christ, we only have two sacraments – baptism and communion. These two sacraments are considered essential for us to be more than a social organization, more than a community who offers fellowship and support to

one another, and more than a community who is service minded to care for the needs of the poor, the homeless, the oppressed and those who are ill. As a church we are called to believe that these sacraments have a mystical component to them. We consider baptism a sacrament because the ritual of baptism connects us mystically to God. We consider communion a sacrament because we believe in the possibility of God's mystical presence being revealed to us each time that we partake of bread and the cup. These sacraments may not transfigure us, but they may transform us into the Body of Christ.

So what do we make of the second common element in today's texts? This second common element is the evidence visible to others that transfiguration had occurred. For Moses, his face shone. It seems that Moses was not fully aware of this physical change in his body, until he saw the reaction of Aaron and the Israelites. It is interesting to note that the focus on the word of God written on the tablets is almost overshadowed by the shining of Moses' face. Yet Moses accommodates those who look upon him by wearing a veil. For Jesus, his face shone and his clothes were dazzling white as witnessed to by the three apostles as well as the other followers of Jesus present when they came down off the mountain.

I believe a powerful aspect of these stories is for us to understand the power of giving witness. Even if we want to put a scientific explanation to mystical experiences, we cannot escape the reality of the testimony provided by Israelites of Moses' transfiguration nor the reality of the testimony provided by the three apostles and by all the followers of Jesus. They spoke about, wrote about and shared their experiences of God as revealed to them by the appearances of Moses and of Jesus. Whether we have seen with our own eyes, or heard with our own ears, or have to rely on the testimony of the Israelites and of the followers of Jesus, we are still called today to be witnesses in the world. We are called in this faith community to share our hearts as well as our minds. We are called in this faith community to be willing to witness to others about our love of God, our faith in Jesus and our commitment to joyously rise to the challenge of living Jesus Christ's example.

Jesus needed to come down off the mountaintop. Jesus needed not to dwell on his transfiguration, but to dwell on serving God's mission. He needed to expand his community by responding to the man in the crowd who shouted to him, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child." (Luke 9:38) He needed to bear witness to the power of God by rebuking the unclean spirit and healing the man's only son so that *"All were astounded with the greatness of God."* (Luke 9: 43)

As many of you may have noted over the nine months we have been together Sunday after Sunday in worship, I am fond of finding interpretations of our text by commentators that surprise me or that teach or reveal something to me about the text that I have either never known or have forgotten. I found such an insight this week from Biblical Commentator, Cláudio Carvalhaes. In commenting on the Luke text, he says, *"One of the lessons of this text is that the glory of God is only possible if lived together, in community. Nobody, not even Jesus, could shine alone!...Glory is only possible if shared and that means that we are to share the light of Christ to the world, especially those placed in the shadows of our society."*<sup>1</sup> Without

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2756](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2756)

this insight I would not have titled today's sermon: "The Power of Community" nor would I have understood the importance of community in these stories of transfiguration – far more powerful than the individual experiences of Moses and Jesus.

Moses relied on the power of his community when he came down off the mountaintop with the Ten Commandments. He did not even know that his face was a shining light. He could have stayed on the mountaintop. He could have had his private audience with God. And that would not have served God's mission. He needed to come off the mountaintop and lead his people. It was the power of people, the power of his community reflected back to him how they saw evidence in his face of God's presence. His community received the tablets and transformed their lives and the lives of all who have followed in the Judeo-Christian world by giving witness in spoken word, in written word and in their actions of all that God requires of those who choose to live in God's light.

Carvalhaes's insight about Jesus' need for community was not new for me, but helped me to both see Jesus' need for his apostles and followers, and our need for each other in this community in a more prominent light. Even though Jesus' community so often failed him by being sleepy or misunderstanding his purpose, his mission has been fulfilled over the years because of the witness of his community.

So it is true for us at Edina Morningside Church. We experience God's presence more powerfully when we are gathered in community. Let us move into this season of Lent seeking to build on our past. Let us move into this season of Lent seeking to hear God's call discerning new ways to be engaged in mission down off the mountaintop. Let us move into this season of Lent as we seek to discern new pastoral leadership and as we seek to bind ourselves together in community in richer and more fulfilling ways. May we also follow God's command to listen to Jesus through the recorded words of Jesus, through the testimony and witness of his followers throughout history; and through the Still Speaking God.

Let us rejoice in the knowledge that the glory of God is only possible if lived together, in community. Let it be so for us today. Amen.