

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, February 26, 2017)

Text: **Exodus 24:12-18** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Then Yahweh said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, and I will give you the Law and the commandments, which I have inscribed on stone tablets, for you to teach them with.”

So Moses and Joshua, his attendant, went up the mountain of God, saying to the elders, “Wait here for us until we return. Aaron and Hur will be with you; if there is dispute among you, turn to them.

Then Moses went up the mountain to where the clouds engulfed it. The glory of Yahweh then came to dwell on Mount Sinai. The cloud covered the mountain for six days; on the seventh day, God called to Moses out of the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of Yahweh looked like an all-consuming fire at the top of the mountain. Moses climbed the mountain until he disappeared into the cloud, and stayed there for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John up on a high mountain to be alone with them.

And before their eyes, Jesus was transfigured—his face becoming as dazzling as the sun and his clothes as radiant as light.

Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them, conversing with Jesus. Then Peter said, “Rabbi, how good that we are here! With your permission I will erect three shelters here—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah!”

Peter was still speaking when suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them. Out of the cloud came a voice which said, “This is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my favor rests. Listen to him!”

When they heard this, the disciples fell forward on the ground, overcome with fear. Jesus came toward them and touched them, saying, “Get up! Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they did not see anyone but Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountainside, Jesus commanded them, “Don’t tell anyone about this until the Chosen One has risen from the dead.”

Reflections by Pastor Donald: “The Law of LOVE”

Do you embrace mystery?

Would you rather everything be illuminated and understandable, and you wouldn’t have to guess?

Do you ever think, “oh man, if only somebody would just light the way, and hand me the road map, then I could just live my life and not have to struggle so much?”

Well, well, welcome to the human condition.

As Jesus takes his three friends up to the mountain with him, I wonder what they were thinking as they trudged after this man who had brought so much illumination to their lives. Don’t you think they thought a few times about going back to fishing? Wouldn’t it be so much easier to do what you had been trained to do, what you knew HOW to do, what was easy and familiar to you?

I mean, come on, do we always have to be climbing some mountain? Learning and climbing and climbing and learning? Isn't this transforming stuff just so much WORK?!

I truthfully never thought I'd be quoting a pope in a United Church of Christ, but in his book, "Encountering Truth: Meeting God in the Everyday," the 266th and transcendent Pope Francis speaks to this point of the mystery of the spirit and the work we must do to be illumined and transformed by it when he says, "To put it simply: the Holy Spirit bothers us. Because he moves us, he makes us walk, he pushes the Church to go forward. And we are like Peter at the Transfiguration: 'Ah, how wonderful it is to be here like this, all together!'...But don't bother us. We want the Holy Spirit to doze off...we want to domesticate the Holy Spirit. And that's no good. Because he is God, he is that wind which comes and goes and you don't know where. He is the power of God, he is the one who gives us consolation and strength to move forward. But: to move forward! And this bothers us. It's so much nicer to be comfortable." And, yes, I would certainly prefer that Pope Francis be more inclusive with his language, especially since the Holy Spirit as I encounter her is Sophia, but we will let the meaning come through his words as he spoke them and they were transcribed for us for today.

Let's take a look at what happens to Jesus and his disciples as they are made to walk and climb those many steps to get to the top of the mountain. Perhaps they thought they were off on another field trip, where Jesus would stop somewhere, sit them down and do some good teaching, maybe share a parable or two or answer some questions. But, instead of sitting around and having a few fishcakes and a chat, on this mountain, Jesus takes a radical new approach in his teaching and even changes in his very appearance before Peter, James and John's very eyes and then, for a little something extra, brings in Elijah and Moses for a deep conversation.

Jesus, you see, takes these three disciples he believes are ready for the next step in their spiritual journey and pulls a radical new method of deep personal instruction out of his pedagogical bag: He asks them to enter into The Mystery- that great cloud of illumination wherein he will be transfigured and they will be transformed.

As writer John Shearman points out, "The point of Jesus' teaching the disciples how to enter into this mystical experience was that each of them could also become a "child of God" as he had known himself to be since his baptism by John and once again experienced in the Transfiguration."

Rodney Hunter in "Feasting on the Word" puts it this way: "Jesus' mission was not to make a big deal of himself or to elevate his followers to positions of power, authority, and prestige through identification with him. It was rather to point through and beyond himself to God and to God's coming reign on earth, and to invite his followers to find their voice in bearing witness to this trans-forming, redemptive God."

It's this combination of the human and the divine that Jesus continually holds out to his disciples and to us as absolutely possible. So often throughout His ministry Jesus exhorts us to not only be IN this earthly realm, but to be OF the Godly realm as well. Feet firmly planted here on earth, experiencing all that God has created here, AND illumined and transformed from the inside out that we may experience the TRUTH that we are actually the children of God, able to shine the light of God's truth upon this world that it may be illuminated and transformed itself.

Matthew says that Peter, upon witnessing Jesus's transfiguration, blurted out his idea about building three dwellings for Christ, Moses and Elijah because he wasn't thinking and was stunned by what they were seeing. I think there's a meaning to be found in those words rather than the traditional theological take, though - that Peter was just kind of stumbling over his words out of shock. I think, rather, that Peter was being transformed himself, aided by Jesus to get past the thinking, the crazy chatter of the mind and see beyond the rational. To be illumined within as well as without by that bright cloud overshadowing them up there on that mountain of mystery.

As Rev. Mary Lautensleger tells us, “The mountain is possibly what the Celts referred to as “a thin place,” a place where the veil between heaven and earth is thinner, and allows the barrier between us and the Holy to become more permeable.” Maybe this thin place was illuminating Peter and transforming his spirit so that he could actually EMBRACE the mystery and say “hey, if we make you some places to stay, will you stay? I really want you to stay!”

So what does it take to transfigure or TRANSFORM ourselves? To see ourselves as The Message says of Jesus’s transfiguration, “from the inside out?”

First off, it’s definitely getting to that thin place where we can allow ourselves to be illuminated and transformed, I think. Our willingness to allow that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy (Horatio!). Enveloped in such a “light radiant cloud” we are able to stop relying on our very human, earth bound senses and dwell instead in the realm of our Mysterious God.

In “Plastic Minds and Magic Eyes”, RAGAN SUTTERFIELD says, “With vision taken away, the disciples are called to listen—to be taught, and in that teaching their ability to see will be reoriented so that they ...see the divine beyond the image.” This is what it is to be illuminated with a divine light so bright that it actually transforms our thinking and our way of living and being in this world.

I also think we need to be willing to face those things that are revealed within us as this illuminating light exposes all: The fear that dwells in our hearts, the anger that rips at our gut, the nastiness that hides just behind our teeth and sometimes spills over them. Alexander J. Shaia, writing in *Quadratos* says, “We must become one with ourselves before we can become one with anything outside ourselves, because if we skip this step, fear will always find a way to dictate the terms of our understanding. We rarely can recognize the parts of ourselves that we like least...so we project those characteristics on other people, indeed onto “other” people. What being in Christ offers us—through this one Jesus who practices unconditional love and acceptance—is the safe place to begin to befriend these less acknowledged parts of ourselves. Even our worst fears have something to teach us.”

Opening ourselves to this divine light, being willing to climb up the mountain and into the cloud as Moses did and then later Jesus and His disciples, we must also be willing to face that which will be illumined within us and embrace and deal with what needs to be transformed.

Finally, I think transfiguration can only occur if we truly LISTEN. How do we know that God is Still Speaking if we aren’t still listening? Man, you know this preaching stuff is tough because you have to listen to your own words!!

As the cloud envelops the disciples on the mountain, a voice from deep within it says, “This is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my favor rests. LISTEN to him.” It’s the same voice that was accompanied by a dove as Jesus stood in the Jordan with John and the water flowed in his baptism.

Tod Mundo, on his Progressive Theology Weblog wonders why it was that Jesus chose to take only Peter, James, and John with him when he climbed the Mount of Transfiguration. He says he doesn’t know for sure, but suspects it’s, “similar to the reason why God chose to be revealed to Elijah in a gentle breeze (or a still, small voice, or perhaps even silence) rather than in a windstorm, a blazing fire, or an earthquake. God doesn’t proclaim the divine will on billboards along the highway, nor does God take out an ad in the New York Times when God wants to do something. God only reveals God’s own person and will to people who are ready to LISTEN and, after they’ve heard, are willing to act.

“The good news,” he writes, “is that God, like the Marines, is always looking for a few good women and men, people who are listening intently to hear God’s voice, people who have the courage to act on what they understand God wants them to do.”

Allow yourselves to be illumined and your lives transformed, my friends. Be transfigured as you enter the light radiant cloud, face your Truth, and listen...

“Unfolding light” by Steve Garnaas-Holmes

The disciples were having no strange vision,
nor the evangelist concocting a tableau
for the delight of Renaissance painters.

It was simply this: for a moment
Jesus’ friends were seeing truly,
seeing him as he was,
seeing a human being as we all truly are,
shining with the whole glory of Creation,
stardust that we are.

They saw through the scruff and dirt
that this rough world leaves on us,
saw past the judgments and appearances,
the masks and costumes and shrouds
that we throw on each other:
they saw the heaven within a person,
the image of God.

If only they hadn’t been so shocked
they would have noticed it in themselves.

Jesus had to tell them later:
“You are light for the world.”

God shines in you,
gleams with the splendid light of heaven.
Beyond any smudge this world can put on you,
or any human word or deed can remove,
you are dazzling, radiant with newborn light.

Right now, sitting there,
you breathe God’s light in and out.

Your nerves spark with life.

Your eyes light up the world.

Let this light fill you, the fire of God.

Be mindful of this radiance.

Look for the light in all whom you meet.

Trust the light. Give thanks for the light.

Even in your sleep, the light closes its eye,
but breathes deeply, calmly, faithfully.

Amen.