

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, February 23, 2020)

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 a 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 clouds. 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.

Text: 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.”

Exploring with Pastor Donald Shenk: “Transforming Light”

Open my eyes, God, help me to see your face. Open my ears and help me to hear your voice. Open my heart and help me to love like you. These words from our opening song today lead us into what it takes to be transformed and prompt us to consider what needs to happen in order for a transfiguration to occur.

But first we have to come to some understanding of exactly what it is to be transformed and what it means to be transfigured.

Our present cultural touchstones don’t help us too much, as most of us are not Autobots or Decepticons able to shift our parts around to become something else, least of all some

mechanical object seeking the key to ultimate power as in the Transformer toy, comic and film franchise.

And when we think of transfiguration, maybe some of us wonder if it has anything to do with the transgender community, wherein someone has a gender identity or gender expression that differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.

Now THIS wonderment actually brings us closer to the idea of transfiguration, which the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines as “a change in form or appearance or a metamorphosis” as well as “an exalting, glorifying, or spiritual change.” For certainly many, if not all, of our trans sisters and brothers and others would testify to experiencing a metamorphosis in their state of being and thinking and, perhaps, undergoing physical changes to match their gender identity and expression resulting in an exalting and glorifying change.

In Christ’s case, we can certainly propose a parallel with this understanding of transfiguration as his true identity as God’s child is confirmed when he and his disciples reach the mountaintop and a bright cloud suddenly overshadows them and from within that cloud a voice declares “this is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my favor rests,” and commands those gathered there to “Listen to him!”

In a further confirmation of who he is and how comfortable he is knowing it, he tells his disciples to get up and not be afraid after they’ve been knocked to the ground with awe and terror at the cloud, the voice and the true light coming from one who walked the earth as they did and seemed to be of flesh and bone beams upon them.

So maybe transformation and transfiguration have something to do with not only embracing our true natures as children of God, but with our willingness to be open, unafraid and aware enough to enter the cloud of unknowing and allow the light to penetrate us deeply within God’s realm.

It had to take a lot of courage for Moses to climb his own mountain and enter God’s engulfing cloud, not knowing what he would find there or what would happen to him, or if he would ever emerge. What could there be within his soul and his mind that would give him the mettle to not only climb into what to the Israelites looked like an all-consuming fire, but to stay there for 40 days and 40 nights while he received the Law and the commandments?

It makes me wonder how much our own fear keeps us from encountering the divine in our own lives. How much do we need to be willing to give up, to change, and to transform that we might be transfigured ourselves, becoming so filled with the light of God’s love that we shine it on every person and upon every situation we encounter?

Don’t be fooled, folks; every one of us is in need of transformation throughout our lives. That thing we thought yesterday, that choice we made a few years ago, that decision we so boldly proclaimed was the right one a few moments ago may need to change with a moment’s notice. As we open our ears, our eyes and our hearts every day, God may just have something

new and wonderful to show us which will lead us into transforming our hearts, souls and minds that we may shine more brightly with God's understanding instead of our own.

Just as our bodies are constantly transforming, shedding cells and sloughing off skin, so our minds and hearts need to transform as new ideas are engaged, new mountains are climbed and new clouds of understanding are entered. As the researchers at Stanford University tell us, "whether it's shedding skin, renewing the lungs or growing new hairs, the human body is in constant flux," so shouldn't that eternal most important part of us, our souls, be constantly growing, changing and transforming, too?

"How do we understand the presence of the divine revealed as we seek to do ministry in communities around us? Do we see the possibilities afforded us from being in the company of the Divine or would we prefer to stay where we are in the moment, fashion booths that are unrelated to the mission and vision for ministry, and stay where we are?" asks UCC commentator Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson.

"The moment of transformation is one that invites us to new and meaningful encounters with God. How can Jesus be revealed in our time?

"Epiphany is the season of revelation. We have seen Jesus revealed, now what? What is there for us to do with what we have seen and heard? Jesus is not new to us; neither is the nature and presence of the Divine. Can we make room for change in our lives and for divine revelation to impact the world through us?"

As I walk through my neighborhood each day or take a stroll around the church, I am always struck by what has changed from the day before or the last time I encountered the space in which I find myself.

There's a burst of yellow daffodils popping up from an old bulb I don't even remember planting. Over there's a blooming rose emerging from a bunch of dead leaves. Here's a new business putting in bigger windows to let the light shine through and is that 20-year-old ambling across the street really the toddler I remember running through our preschool gate?

God calls us to transform, to be transfigured and to be filled with light. Will we heed the call to head up the mountain? Can we reflect the light always shining and encouraging us to change?

For a New Beginning by John O'Donohue

In out-of-the-way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts
never think to wander,
This beginning has been
quietly forming, Waiting until
you were ready to emerge.

For a long time
it has watched your desire,
Feeling the emptiness
growing inside you,
Noticing how you willed yourself on,
Still unable to leave
what you had outgrown.

It watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the gray promises
that sameness whispered,
Heard the waves of turmoil
rise and relent,
Wondered would you always
live like this.

Then the delight,
when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again
with energy and dream,
A path of plenitude
opening before you.

Though your destination
is not yet clear
You can trust the promise
of this opening;

Unfurl yourself into the
grace of beginning
That is at one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back,
learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home
in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses
the world that awaits you.