

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, February 27, 2022)

Text: Luke 9:28-43 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Now about eight days after these sayings, Jesus took Peter, John and James and went up onto a mountain to pray. While Jesus was praying, his face changed in appearance and the clothes he wore became dazzlingly white. Suddenly two people were there talking with Jesus- Moses and Elijah. They appeared in glory and spoke of the prophecy that Jesus was about to fulfill in Jerusalem.

Peter and the others had already fallen into a deep sleep, but awakening, they saw Jesus's glory- and the two people who were standing next to him. When the two were leaving, Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, how good it is for us to be here! Let's set up three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah!" Peter didn't really know what he was saying.

While Peter was speaking, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and the disciples grew fearful as the others entered it. Then from the cloud came a voice which said, "This is my Own, my Chosen One. Listen to him!"

When the voice finished speaking, they saw no one but Jesus standing there. The disciples kept quiet, telling nothing of what they had seen at that time to anyone.

The following day, when they came down the mountain, a large crowd awaited him. A man stepped out of the crowd and said, "Teacher, please come and look at my son, my only child. A demon seizes him and he screams, and it throws him into convulsions until he foams at the mouth. It releases the boy only with difficulty, and when it does, he is exhausted. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they couldn't."

Jesus said in reply, "You unbelieving and perverse generation! How much longer must I be among you and put up with you? Bring the child to me. As the boy approached, the demon dashed the child to the ground and threw him into a violent convulsion. But Jesus reprimanded the unclean spirit, healed the child and returned him to his father. All present were awestruck at the greatness of God.

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk:

"Movin' On Up to Come On Down"

Like Easter and Christmas, Transfiguration Sunday is one of those special days on the Christian calendar that comes around every year and challenges us to consider its meaning and significance for our lives. This particular Sunday holds a special place on our church calendar as it precedes the start of Lent by only a few days.

And I think there's something special to ponder in this placement of the transfiguration so close to another type of transforming experience as we realize that just before Jesus entered the desert to be tempted by the devil, where he will wander through the wilderness tormented and starving, here on the Christian calendar he is lifted high up on a mountain where his face is changed and his appearance dazzles the disciples.

Now, this is not the chronological sequence of events in any of the synoptic gospels where this same story occurs, mind you, but it's symbolic sequential significance as it relates to how we consider Jesus's divinity and his humanity as well as our own, can be powerful in preparing ourselves for Lent and, in fact, the rest of our lives, I think.

For what must happen in our minds and our hearts to prepare us for our own journeys through the deserts of our lives is something worth wondering about before we are compelled to wander around searching for sustenance and challenged to survive whatever wilderness we find ourselves in.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration as found in Luke which Marcia read so well for us today, does provide sequential evidence of what I'm getting at here as we see Jesus ascending the mountain with his chosen disciples, and disappearing into a cloud with his mentors and teachers where he is once again declared beloved or "My Chosen One" by his creator.

And then what happens right afterwards, why he goes down the mountain and is immediately thrust into the challenges and demands of the people and their problems.

What's telling here is that instead of just immediately taking on the healing of the tormented child as he knows he can do, Jesus is incredibly put out with his disciples for not believing in themselves and doing the healing on their own.

"How much longer must I be among you and put up with you?" he says, as any frustrated parent or teacher has surely thought if not actually uttered in their lifetime?

I have a feeling whatever serene, glorified countenance Jesus exhibited on the mountaintop was transformed in that moment to an expression of exhaustion and exasperation, don't you?

What will it take for you to believe that you have the power to do all I have done and more, Jesus asks his disciples and us? When will you stop passing the buck and know that it's YOU who have been chosen to do the work of healing and feeding and caring for those in need? When will you transform your faith so that you don't act like a needy, helpless child anymore but step into your calling and know that the same God that is with me is surely with you and will enable you to take on any healing and transformative activity you are called to perform?

"Remembering Jesus' transfiguration and our calling to be reflections of Christ is the climax of the Season after the Epiphany" our Seasons of the Spirit asserts. "We pause on this day to celebrate and hold within us, the presence of Holy Mystery that will empower us for the journey into Lent...the story about what makes Jesus glorious is still one for us to emulate. We can still be clear in our identity as followers of Christ, bold in our rebuke of ignorance and injustice and courageous in our compassion."

Our UCC theologian Cheryl Lindsay provides us with another fascinating insight along this path towards understanding what we need to come back down with as she considers why

the Old Testament figures of Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus in front of the disciples during their mountaintop experience.

“The purpose of this moment was for [them] to see themselves, their ministry, and—most importantly—their relationship to Jesus in light of Moses and Elijah,” she writes. “Like those two prophets and leaders before them, they are chosen for purposes. They will be challenged and discouraged. They will have to cultivate and nurture the leadership of others while still leading a movement in the earliest stages. They will make mistakes and endure moments of weakness. Elijah had a panic attack and ran from the purpose of God. Moses forgot the source of his power and assumed glory for himself rather than reflect it back to the One who sent him. Peter will act recklessly and deny his friendship with Jesus. James and John will jockey for position rather than humbly and gratefully take the place set for them. There will be challenges and lows beyond their imagination.”

And Jesus knows this and shows them not only how they can surround themselves with radiance and the sure knowledge of God’s presence but also allows them to see the people they would have considered the pillars of their faith (as we surely do ours) who faced many challenges and self-doubts and stumbling blocks on their own ways up and down the mountains of their lives.

Jan Richardson is an artist and a poet I have read often during my ministry and I’ve shared many of her poems with you as I will do again today. But before I do I wanted to read to you some of her own thoughts on the significance of this day. I found this especially moving because what she wrote here, she was writing in the midst of significant grief over the recent loss of her husband Gary, a true collaborator with her in her art and her life. She had just started to paint again after losing him and was having a really rough time of it.

“Life has required me, in a painfully vivid fashion, to release what I have counted on most,” she notes.

“As I navigate the new terrain of my life, I am continually faced with choices—in my painting, in my writing, in the agonizing sorting of Gary’s things, in every aspect of every unfolding day—about what to hold onto, and what to let go. In the midst of all this, our story this week asks me, in all the changing, what abides? In the leaving and letting go, what gift still goes with us? How will we allow ourselves to be transformed by the transfigured Christ who accompanies us in every place?

“The story of the Transfiguration is not simply about learning to leave the mountaintop,” she muses, “or about releasing what we have grown attached to... The story of the Transfiguration is about opening our eyes to glory, allowing that glory to alter us, and becoming willing to walk where it leads us. The story urges us to trust that what we have seen, what we have known, will go with us. It assures us that the gifts received on the mountaintop will continue to illuminate us not only on level ground but even when we walk in the valley of the shadow.”

This is, “**Dazzling: A Blessing for Transfiguration Sunday**” by Jan Richardson

Believe me, I know
how tempting it is
to remain inside this blessing,
to linger where everything
is dazzling
and clear.

We could build walls
around this blessing,
put a roof over it.
We could bring in
a table, chairs,
have the most amazing meals.
We could make a home.
We could stay.

But this blessing
is built for leaving.
This blessing
is made for coming down
the mountain.
This blessing
wants to be in motion,
to travel with you
as you return
to level ground.

It will seem strange
how quiet this blessing becomes
when it returns to earth.
It is not shy.
It is not afraid.

It simply knows
how to bide its time,
to watch and wait,
to discern and pray
until the moment comes
when it will reveal
everything it knows,
when it will shine forth
with all that it has seen,
when it will dazzle
with the unforgettable light
you have carried
all this way.”

Amen.