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Transfiguration: Learning to see  
Martin Grove United Church  
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 9:2-9

In our Protestant tradition, this week we celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus. That's the name we give to the story we just read where a few of the disciples climbed a mountain with Jesus and saw Jesus transformed - sorry, I mean "transfigured". This week also marks the end of Epiphany. That's important not only because next Sunday will be the first Sunday in Lent, but because this Tuesday is Shrove Tuesday - traditionally a great chance for a wonderful meal at a local church. And this Wednesday is Ash Wednesday.

If you can remember back just a few weeks, we were discussing Jesus's baptism. And in Mark's version of Jesus's baptism, during the event God descends like a dove and says to Jesus, "You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." That story describes God making a revelation of who Jesus was in a way that the disciples could understand.

Today's story of the transfiguration of Jesus happens near the end of Jesus's public ministry, not long before he goes to Jerusalem. Not long before his arrest and crucifixion. And again, at the transfiguration God makes a revelation of who Jesus is. And what is that revelation? In Mark, God appears as a voice in the clouds and says, "This is my son, the beloved; listen to him." I have often thought that was such an odd thing for God to say. Because the revelation at the transfiguration is virtually identical to the revelation at Jesus's baptism!

So, according to Mark, God's revelation of Jesus did not change substantially during the three years of Jesus ministry. Didn't the disciples learn anything about Jesus after spending three years with him, interacting with people, teaching, and healing? What is going on? What is so special about the transfiguration of Jesus if the message revealed by God is practically the same as the message that God had revealed years earlier at Jesus's baptism? What does the story of the transfiguration add to our understanding of

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Jesus and his ministry? What does the story of the transfiguration add to our understanding of our own faith? Why do we celebrate transfiguration Sunday anyway?

Perhaps a quick reading of the transfiguration doesn't give us the whole story. Perhaps something more is going on here. One difference between the revelation at Jesus's baptism and the revelation at the transfiguration was the audience. When Jesus was baptized, the audience was just ... well we are not actually told, but presumably just a crowd of no-name people who hung around John, including John's disciples. At Jesus's transfiguration, the audience included Jesus's core group of friends, and the images of Moses and Elijah. Is there some significance to them? Presumably there was. Mark's audience probably knew their significance without being told, but we have to guess. In this case, our guess is likely quite accurate.

Most biblical scholars do not see the transfiguration as a historical event as written. Even just reading the text gives that impression too. For example, in Mark, Jesus - while walking down the mountain with his friends - refers to the event as "what you have seen", not, "what happened". And in Matthew, Jesus instructs his friends to not discuss "the vision" with others. Moreover, by Jewish law, consulting with the dead was an offence punishable by death, so it's hard to imagine Jesus actually speaking to the dead Moses and Elijah in the story.

But if we step back and consider Moses and Elijah as imagery, it is reasonable to connect Moses with the Torah - the Hebrew Bible, and to connect Elijah with the prophets. So perhaps the revelation at the transfiguration was different than the one at baptism in that the prophets and scripture were complicit in the revelation. Perhaps the original intent of the story of the transfiguration was to state that Jesus's ministry was in alignment with both prophecy and scripture. Perhaps the story was crafted with that intention and nothing more.

But regardless of whether this story is intended to be understood in that way, or taken as a historical event, it raises interesting questions for us. Because we decide how to place ourselves within the story. Where do you put yourself in this story? Is anyone here arrogant enough to imagine themselves as Elijah, or Jesus? Well then, I suppose we all place ourselves - as we often do - as the disciples.

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Whenever I hear the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, I always wonder - what actually happened on that mountain. What would we have seen if we had been there ourselves? One interpretation is that Jesus looked different to the disciples because Jesus changed. The story is certainly written that way. Mark says, “he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them” The story as written certainly suggests that Jesus changed, or at least his appearance changed.

But perhaps Jesus looked different to the disciples because the disciples were themselves changed. Perhaps it was the disciples’ ability to see that changed. Did Jesus’s body physically change, or was it that John, James, and Peter could now see the face of God shining through the man that they thought they already knew well? Who was changed that day? Jesus? Or the disciples?

Learning to see sounds like something that human babies need to do. And they do. But even those of us who are slightly older than babies sometimes find we ourselves need to learn to see differently. Last weekend, Marjorie and I went to a festival downtown. I learned a lot of things, but I perhaps learned the most just by walking into the room where the festival was held. Because I learned that I needed to see better. When I walked into the room where the festival was held, I was immediately stunned to see an enormous man standing in the middle of the room. He was a large man. His gut went out to here. His beard went down to here. And his leather jacket had more Harley Davidson patches than I had expected to find. Why was I surprised? I was surprised because Marjorie and I were at the Toronto Tea Festival. And I needed to fix my ability to see. Because the old Rev. Paul struggled with the image of this monster of a biker being interested in comparing the nuances of exotic teas. I needed to learn to see better.

If you don’t believe that your perspective controls what you think reality is, consider these images.

[slide: lamp light]

[slide: large golf ball]

[slide: lecture]

[slide: cauliflower dress]

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[slide: woman pushing over building]

[slide: 3D heart]

Our perspective has a huge impact on how we imagine reality! Which means, if we don't like our reality, perhaps we need to learn to see better.

I'm reminded of the 1988 movie, "Rain Man". That's a movie that's all about learning to see better. At the beginning of the movie, Charlie's father has just died, and Charlie inherits an old car and some rose bushes. The father's estate went to Charlie's brother Raymond, who has been hospitalized for decades because he lives with autism. Charlie thought he was an only child and resented his father giving "his" money to a stranger. Charlie had hoped for \$3M from the estate. So Charlie kidnapped Raymond from the institution he lived in, and they went on a road trip. Charlie was holding Raymond as a hostage against the now \$1.5M that Charlie felt he was entitled to.

Raymond is an interesting character. He functions pretty well overall, but has many compulsive behaviours. In the beginning, Charlie tries to "cure" Raymond of his compulsive behaviours, but soon realizes that strategy doesn't work. And as their road trip together continues, Charlie becomes much more in tune with Raymond's needs. Charlie even learns that his own life runs more smoothly if he anticipates and gives Raymond what he needs in advance. Raymond is not hard to predict, because he is totally driven by a fixed weekly schedule for food, snacks, TV shows, and other things. Charlie comes to enjoy Raymond's company too.

And by the end of the movie, Charlie no longer thinks that Raymond is faking his autism, Charlie no longer thinks that Raymond is trying to annoy him. In fact, by the end of the movie, Charlie loves - and even likes - his brother, the brother he thought he didn't have.

It's a fun movie to watch. Because all movies show characters changing. But in this case, Raymond does not change. He is not capable of change. So all the change happened in Charlie. At the beginning of the movie Charlie was completely self-absorbed and selfish, but by the end of the movie Charlie not only appreciated Raymond, but he stops taking his girlfriend for granted too. Learning to see better changes your whole life! Learning to see better leads to new life.

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So when I read the story of the transfiguration, I imagine that it was the disciples's ability to see that changed. And what would be the bigger miracle anyway? Jesus's body physically changing? Or the disciples - who were ordinary people like us - learning to see better and being able to see the face of God in Jesus? Besides, if Jesus had changed - that change would have lasted for - what - 30 seconds. But the disciples learned to see better, and that affected them for the rest of their lives, and it impacted everyone they met. Learning to see better is by far a better miracle than any momentary optical episode.

And if the disciples learned to see better that day, did their ability to see better come down from the mountain with them when they finally descended? When they left the mountain to return to everyday life, did the disciples take their new capacity to see into the valleys of their world? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in Jesus when they were not on the mountain? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in other people? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in each other? Were the disciples able to see the face of God even in themselves?

We too can seize the opportunity to see better. To see the face of God in our own community. To see the face of God right here in our midst. To see the face of God in each other. And yes, to even see the face of God in ourselves. If you can't quite see that yet - relax. Lent is coming. Keep looking for the face of God and God will appear. Of course, you just might need to learn to see better first.

*Amen.*