

## Jesus, Our Center

February 27, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Luke 9: 28-36*

And so, the season of Epiphany comes to a close, with Jesus in prayer on a mountain, and the disciples starting to doze off—only to see their teacher transfigured by dazzling light! In an instant the veil between earth and heaven is parted, and the glory that has been with Jesus from the beginning suddenly becomes visible.

The disciples are still trying to work out whether they're asleep or awake when Moses and Elijah appear at Jesus' side, earnestly speaking with him. Throughout his ministry, his critics have treated him as a threat, a disrupter of mainstream religion. Now, in a mountaintop epiphany that echoes Moses before the burning bush, Jesus is shown united with the heart of the Jewish tradition, the Torah and prophets.

But what are Jesus and Moses and Elijah talking about together? Luke says they are talking about *“his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”* At the very moment of his glorification, just as his closeness to God is made visible to human sight, they're talking about... his crucifixion.

In our yearly cycle of readings, the story of the Transfiguration is the hinge, connecting the season of Epiphany just ending and the season of Lent which begins later this week. It serves as a pivot point between the revolutionary, boundary-busting ministry of Jesus and the story of his passion, or suffering.

The voice we heard from heaven calling Jesus “my Son” looks back his baptism, where his ministry began. The disciples who doze off while Jesus prays looks ahead to his agony in the garden of Gethsemane as his adversaries close in. Here, at the center point, the meaning of all of these events is made manifest.

From Jesus' bold proclamation in Luke 4 at the start of his ministry—

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor—*

to his first works of healing, to his outreach to tax collectors and sinners, to his teaching about mercy and forgiveness, to his calming of the storm, to his casting out of oppressive spirits, to his feeding of the 5,000, Luke's gospel has painted a portrait of God let loose in the world, stirring up what John Lewis would call *good trouble*: a welcome for outcasts and sinners, dismay for the guardians of religious order.

The stories have at times seemed fantastical, as loaves have multiplied, as leprous skin has been restored, as breath has returned to a lifeless child. In our more scientific age, it's understandable that we might wonder if these deeds of Jesus are closer to folklore than real historical events. Yet vividly, viscerally, they tell the story of God's transforming power poured out on the world in Jesus. The miracles may seem magical, but the human needs he is responding to are all too painfully real and familiar. Wherever Jesus goes, these stories are telling us, something new and liberating breaks in to change the narrative of human struggle. They point, like the Transfiguration, to what lies behind our sight and expectation—inviting us into a world we can't yet see.

Today, on the mountaintop, the veil parts and reveals the meaning of what the disciples have been seeing and hearing: that the light of God is made manifest in Jesus. Soon, some of those whose attitudes and deeds that light exposes will begin making plans to try and extinguish it.

A hinge text. A pivot point, looking back, and looking forward. Offered to us today at a hinge moment in history.

How much has changed in just a few short days.

Amid the shattering of international norms, amid heartsick anxiety for the people of Ukraine, from the moment the first Russian bombs were loosed on Ukrainian cities, surely the realization has been dawning on us that the world has now irrevocably changed. There can be no going back from this event, no returning to our old assumptions... We are moving into a still unknown future.

And I don't know about you, but I just want to rewind... back to a time before the invasion, back before mutating viruses, before Q-Anon and surging white nationalism and all-out assaults on democracy—I just want to turn back the clock on all of it. I want to make the story come out differently.

There are other, more personal things I would rewind too, if I could. Small things and big things. Moments of shame and failure. Life-altering moments of trauma and loss.

I understand why Peter wants to hit the pause button right now, instead of going back down the mountain.

*“Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah!”*

Who can blame him for wanting to capture the glory and display it for everyone to see: to enshrine it, to build dwellings for the holy presence, as the Israelites once made a tabernacle for God in the wilderness, as Solomon build a temple in Jerusalem.

Then they’ll see—those naysayers and critics. Then the whole world will know how wrong they’ve been about Jesus.

If only Peter could stay up in those heady heights, and forget what Jesus said 8 days before—that *“the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”*

But there’s no going back, then or now. There is only forward.

If the stories of Jesus’ ministry have often seemed fantastical up until now, soon the narrative will become all too grimly believable. We will be led where we would rather not go, to confront the reality of human plots and human cruelty, human cowardice and human betrayal, the cold calculations of rulers, the schemes of the guardians of tradition, the roar of the crowd—the brutality of the cross.

Today, poised at the center between the season of his lifegiving work and the season of his wrenching suffering, stands the Transfiguration. It is the hinge, the pivot point, the interpretive key that explains where we have been and where we are going. It connects Jesus’ revelatory life with his equally revelatory suffering. For both reveal who God is, and HOW God is with us: not on the sidelines, not high above us looking down—but with us, in the very center of everything... even when we feel most alone, most godforsaken.

*Follow me*, Jesus said to us back in Galilee. *Come with me*. And now we are going where we don’t want to go, but not alone. We go because Jesus’ path leads there, and his path leads there because so many others have already walked it before him, and are walking it now, and will walk it in the future.

This is how God invades our lives: not with tanks and guns and armed aircraft, but empty-handed, in sandals, walking beside us at every step.

God’s gift of self freely given, broken and shared.

It is crucial that we see this now, before the journey of Lent begins. Because if we fail to understand it, we may become very confused about what God is doing. We may think that God is orchestrating events, sending Jesus into harm’s way, ordaining his death—in

effect, siding with his persecutors. Isn't that what persecutors always claim—that God is on their side?

But hear the voice of God in our scripture today: *“This is my Son, my Chosen one.”* Can the lover be separated from the beloved? Can the parent stand aside from the suffering of the child? Don't they share one heart?

So too, Jesus shares one heart with us. Where we go, he must go too, even to the very depths of the abyss.

His journey in the weeks to come will not be that of a man on his way to his own sacrifice, but a passage into the heart of our pain, a journey of infinite compassion and embrace, even into our deepest darkness. As John proclaims:

*“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”*

That light is the light of God, shining even when we cannot see it. God does not turn away from Jesus as the Cross comes closer. She does not stand aside or avert her gaze.

Nor does God turn away from the reality of what is happening in Ukraine, which will go on unfolding in ways that will touch every one of us, because history holds the whole human family together in one fabric.

But the Cross will never be the end of the road. It will never have the last word. God goes with us in Jesus in order to bring us through to the other side. The Holy One will not rest until we are safe, every last one of us, in the embrace of the glory which is God's own inner life of generosity and joy.

There will be no building of holy dwellings to set Jesus apart from the rest of us.

Instead he'll offer his hand to us, and walk with us back down the mountain, continuing the southward way to Jerusalem. But the glory we glimpsed on the mountain will go on shining—the glory of unstoppable love, calling each of us to the work of healing and feeding, forgiving and reconciling, even when everything around us seems dark.

This Lent at First Church, we're being invited to meditate on Jesus for a season... to reflect on who he is for us today, and at this moment in history.

And I just want to say that you don't have to be a Jesus mystic, the way I am, to draw consolation and courage from his bright-shining life. You don't have to “believe in miracles” to grasp the deeper truth the gospels are telling about a God who pushes through every barrier to draw near to us, to break our shackles, to bind our wounds, to bring peace among peoples.

Even if for you Jesus is a human figure of history—even if creeds and theological formulations make you bust out in hives—still, there’s a reason you’re here. There’s a reason his words and deeds continue to sound an echo in your soul, in the words of the old hymn. So much in our world has changed over the millennia, and goes on changing, yet his story is still being told, and his way of love continues to be renewed in every generation, even as empires rise and fall.

*God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. (Ps. 46)*

May that love of Jesus ground you in the days and weeks ahead. May you feel it at your center, authentic and deep, flowing outward to the world in fresh and surprising ways. And if, on some days, you lose your way, or your hope begins to falter, then hear the voice of God speaking once more: *“This is my Son, my Chosen one. Listen to HIM!”*

Amen.