

“Be Dazzled”

Exodus 24: 12-18, II Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Transfiguration Sunday, the Seventh Sunday of Epiphany , February 23, 2020, dedicated to the our church's two newborn girls, Molly and Abigail, to all the African-American Members of our Congregation during Black History Month, to blessed memory of Elaine Phillips and Dr. Neela Onawale who passed to eternal life over the weekend, to my father, Dr. Herman C. Ahrens, Jr. who entered eternal life, February 24, 2016 and always to the glory of God!

“Be Dazzled”

Exodus 24: 12-18, II Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

The season of Epiphany is a season of revelation, light, awakenings and the recognition of the “ah-ahs!” of life. It is also a season of God’s power becoming manifest in Christ Jesus.

Epiphany always arrives on January 6 – the 12th night of Christmas - with the wise men in the stable bearing gifts for the newborn king. Epiphany always ends with the Transfiguration of Jesus on a high and holy mountain.

This year, we have been blessed with seven Sundays of Epiphany. So today as Epiphany comes to an end, let us “be dazzled” by our Savior on the Mount of Transfiguration

remembering that in only 72 hours, we will be fasting with him
in the valley of the shadow of temptation.

Things will change....

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of
our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation.
Amen.*

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The Transfiguration of Jesus is a unique metamorphosis from -
human to divine light and back again to human - unseen
elsewhere in our Scriptural Story. After preaching for the first
time about his death in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus along with
Peter, James, John climbs up a high and holy mountain. There,
before their eyes, Jesus is changed. He is radiant. He is glorious
in this transformation embraced by God's pure light!

His garments become whiter than white right in front of them.
In the midst of his transfiguration two other figures appear -
Elijah, the first and greatest prophet and Moses, the great law-
giver and deliverer of Israel. The three transfigured ones stand in
the presence of the three human ones.

The three humans – the disciples – are completely overwhelmed
and awestruck by the Transfigured Ones. Then, a mysterious
cloud overshadows the mountain and a voice comes forth from
the cloud saying, **“This is my beloved Son, Listen to Him!”**

When the disciples hear this voice, they become even more overwhelmed. They fall facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus comes alongside them and touches them. “*Get up,*” he says. “*Don’t be afraid,*” he says. When they look up, they see no one - except Jesus. There on the mountain, Peter, James, and John are once again alone with Jesus, their teacher and friend.

Everything returns to normal, yet nothing will ever be the same again. Behind them are memories of the beautiful days of teaching and healings by the seaside of Galilee, before them stands the valley of the shadow of death which guides them to the challenging days of religious confrontation and cross-bearing hillsides outside the city gates of the metropolis - Jerusalem.

The carpenter of Nazareth is revealed as “Son of God,” “Christ of Glory,” and perhaps most important, **THE One to whom all should “Listen!”** And the question begs itself, “*Does it take a moment like this for disciples to really listen to their Master and Teacher?*” **And for us, do you and I need this transfiguration to really take Jesus seriously?**

Throughout Epiphany, the Jesus of Nazareth whom we have begun to know in Matthew’s Gospel, for all his miraculous powers, is intensely human. He feels pity, anger, hunger, compassion and weariness. But, here in the transfiguration, he shows no emotion. He takes no action. He says nothing until the end, when he reaches down and lifts his disciples to their feet. Rather he appears in glory as an almost passive object of a metamorphosis that reveals his inner nature to his innermost

circle of disciples. Here is pure transcendence, of a sort not found elsewhere in Matthew's gospel – or really anywhere else in scripture.

If you will, the holiness of the Messiah shines through the humanness of the man - with a face so afire that it almost blinds Peter, James, and John.

What are we to make of Elijah and Moses beside him? In the transfiguration of Jesus, we are united with two expectations which were and continue to this day to be alive in Judaism: First, the fulfillment of God's law which is embodied by Moses and second, the return of God's Ultimate prophet embodied by Elijah (a prophet so important to Jewish faith and practice that an empty seat is left every year at Passover for his prophetic return to the every family). On the mountain, the presence of the law and the prophets come together to consummate, in Jesus, the dreams of the past and hopes for the future. Elijah and Moses stand united beside Jesus as a presence declaring, *"Go on! You are on the right path! Go on! Keep going! We are always with you!"*

What are we to make of the disciples on the mountaintop? God reveals to them visions of past glory and a window through which they glimpse glory yet to be. But, nevertheless, we know that the future, like the past is not the proper dwelling place of the church or discipleship. It is the present which defines and clarifies God's call for us. In the present moment, God calls us, like the disciples, down from our mountaintop experiences to

the valleys of need and to a present which beckon us to use God's shine for others, not to try to bottle it for its resale value.

Being Bedazzled is only part of being transfigured or changed forever.

In the award-winning film, "Harriet," depicting the story of Harriet Tubman, actress Cynthia Erivo inspires us with a portrayal of Ariminta "Minty" Ross who escapes slavery and then returns 13 times to free 70 more slaves. Taking the name, Harriet Tubman, Minty becomes such a threat to slaveowners that there is a huge price put her head. She is called "Moses" because she leads her enslaved family and friends and anyone else she can gather to escape to the freedom land.

The white slave owners are terrified of "Moses" because Moses is fearless and excellent in taking slaves to freedom. At one point in the movie, Harriet is walking through a town and white men are talking about catching Moses. In words that are so contemporary to our reality, one slave holder says, "Moses must be a white man in black face. How else could he be smart enough to steal slaves?" In a great shot of Harriet's face, she smirks, shrugs her shoulders and heads back into the night air, as if to say, "stupid white men!"

Harriet is undaunted in her determination to free her family and many more. She always comes at night, in the winter on a Saturday. She knows that white people don't print flyers on Sunday and don't hunt runaways on Sunday because it is the

Sabbath Day. So, she has at least a 36-hour lead before being hunted down.

The mountaintop experience of freedom means nothing to Harriet without bringing others to freedom, too. She never rests in the glory of her freedom knowing that others are still slaves. She is good at what she does, she becomes the first woman spy for the Union Army and eventually leads an army unit to free 300+ slaves as they come by sea at night.

Even when the war ends, Harriet dedicates her life to caring for African-Americans and opens a home for the Aged in Auburn, NY where she sees that former slaves, now free men and women, live out their final days and die with dignity and love. Harriet lives to 91 and dies in March 1913.

Near the end of her life, Harriet said, *“the Lord, who told me to take care of my people, meant to do it just as long as I live, so I did what he told me.”* She didn’t rest when bedazzled on the mountaintop of freedom. She kept going down into the valley of the shadow of death to save her people. The light of God shined in Harriet Tubman all the days of her life and she took that light and saved others. To paraphrase the title of a book recently released, Harriet is “the Blackness between the stars.”

In The Love of Christ: Spiritual Counsels, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, George Gorree and Jean Barbier, share this story of Mother Teresa on a visit to Melbourne in 1982. At the time 72 years old, Mother Teresa tells this story in her own words:

‘In Melbourne, I paid a visit to an old man no one knew existed. I saw that his room was in horrible condition and I wanted to clean it up but he stopped me: ‘I’m all right.’ I kept quiet, and finally he let me go ahead. In his room was a beautiful lamp covered with dust and I asked ‘Why don’t you light the lamp?’ He replied: ‘For what? Nobody comes to see me and I don’t need a lamp.’ Then I said to him, ‘Will you light the lamp if the Sisters come to see you?’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘if I hear a human voice, I will light lamp.’ The other day he sent me word, ‘Tell my friend that the lamp she lit in my life burns constantly.’” (The Love of Christ, Harper and Row: San Francisco, 1982 Pp. 31-32).

“If I hear a human voice, I will light the lamp . . .”

How many times has God’s light brilliantly broken forth in your life because someone has simply taken the time to be God’s transfigured - light shining for you?!

In the present, something like the transfiguration happens for us once in a while. When we catch a glimpse of transfiguration in our lives, we are called to rejoice in it - to embrace the mystery of God’s light in ‘daily transfigurations.’

We see the glowing face of a father carrying his newborn son around hospital hallways introducing the babe to everyone in the path. We behold the light shining out of a new mother as she holds her daughter to her chest leaving court with her newly adopted child of joy! We see a woman glowing with peace, picking peas on a midsummer evening in her garden – a garden in which she has worked for months to bring her to this perfect moment. We see the closed eyes, piercing smile and moving

head of a hopeful young artist listening to a symphony of sound in an orchestra hall and being transported through music to another universe. Or we see another young artist with eyes and mouth wide open standing, head back, and eyes up adoring a masterpiece of art hanging on the wall of a museum. We see a young child standing face out to a vast ocean in awe of waves that echo and hit too far out to hurt but close enough to cause her to scamper like a sandpiper to edge of grassy dunes. We see a young man stealing home and sliding into the plate and laying in a cloud of baseball dirt and dust with the winning run on a Saturday afternoon in July as teammates race through the dust to the plate with arms flailing and feet flying and their triumphal celebration lifting their dirty hero airborne with joy abounding (and I always see Jackie Robinson stealing home!).

We see Harriet arriving again, and again and again in Philadelphia - through the darkness of Slavery into the transfiguring light of Freedom. We see Teresa lifting a lonely and dying person into the light of God.

Yes, every once in a while, transfigured love and life touches us in ways that are so moving, so incandescent, so alive, so mysterious that the human faces around us are changed beyond our capacity to soak it all in. Those around us are changed in a glorious moment beyond bearing. And we glimpse the face of God in a human face, catch the sound of God's voice in a human voice, soak in the magnificent landscape of the divine in a moment of pure joy. Like St. Harriet Tubman of Maryland and St. Teresa of Calcutta's friend in Melbourne so many years ago,

we have heard the voice of God in one of God's beloved ones, we have seen the face of God in the face of one of God's beloved ones, and so we light a lamp that we pray will burn constantly in our lives.

And in these glorious moments, may we be bedazzled once again in this glorious story which blows us away and also touches us deeply in small and beautiful ways. We have been - transfigured - with our Savior.

Thanks be to God. Amen.