

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, the Transfiguration of Christ, March 6, 2011, dedicated to the men and women of First Church who gave the gifts to build the beautiful windows of our sanctuary, to the artists who brought them to life, and always to the glory of God!

“In Light, Inaccessible Hid from our Eyes”

II Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

***Ascension Medallion,
The Jeffrey Window
(Part VII of VII in the sermon series
“Windows into our Souls”)***

2011 marks the 80th anniversary of the opening of this, our “Cathedral of Grace” known as First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio. I have attempted to shed some light on the windows that surround us and touch our souls with dancing colors and vivid images of Christ our Lord. Today, we look at the top medallion - the Ascension of our Lord - or as I affectionately call it, Jesus in the Lotus position. Although our story in scripture is about transfiguration and not ascension, in this frame Jesus is turned into pure light. We are drawn to his purity and unity with God.

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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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On a high and holy mountain, Jesus turns into pure light before the eyes of three disciples. There on the mountaintop, immediately following Jesus' announcement of his death, with Moses on one side and Elijah on the other and joined by the inner circle of the disciples Peter, James, and John, God transfigures Jesus into light and proclaims aloud (as God did at Jesus' baptism) "*This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.*" The divine presence is real and it is revealed on a high and holy mountain.

Bright light has a way of getting our attention. The change of form of one whom we love (particularly if they have just announced their impending death), grabs all of our senses and will not let them go. Naturally, we are fearful and joyful. We are awestruck and God-struck. We are overwhelmed and blinded by our next thoughts as well as the light itself.

Such a moment cries out for response. What do we do? Do we write it down? "YES!" Do we shout it out? "OF COURSE!" Do we build a shrine? "YES" and "NO." Our human sensibilities and sensitivities guide us to build beautiful sanctuaries on high and holy mountains in response to the divine initiative. But the Holy One has a different agenda.

What I have always loved about this brief interlude of Christ as pure light on a mountaintop, in a land filled with deep valleys and the shadows of death, is that it falls between claiming crucifixion and saving a life. Jesus is always and all about the truth and consequences of ministry. Before the Transfiguration, he tells his disciples he will die a violent and gory death on a cross and foretells his resurrection. After the Transfiguration, he returns to sea level and cures a boy with a demon. Today, we would be able to name this as a story of healing mental illness.

Even as Jesus is changed to pure light and the disciples are filled with fear, Jesus is compassionate beyond measure. He responds to their fear by coming to them and touching

them. He tells them to get up. He encourages them to not be afraid. Thomas Long, in his excellent commentary on Matthew, reminds us that Jesus has touched the leper (8:3), the hand of the fevered woman (8:15) and the eyes of the blind men (9:29) and healed them. Thus, as Jesus can heal leprosy, fever and blindness, so can he heal fear. This is where he meets us one on one - for each of us carry some sort of fear about something.

After healing their fear, fear that has led them to planning a shrine on that spot of transfiguration, Jesus tells his followers to say nothing to anyone about the event. He figures, if his top three can't handle the news, how will the rest of the people take it. He saves the disciples by doing this. He knows that if they aren't able to handle seeing him glorified, then they aren't ready to tell about it.

How many times have you found yourself in the place of Peter, James, and John? You have experienced something so powerful that you feel a deep need to share it. But something, someone convinces you to hold it in - knowing that you aren't ready to tell about it.

My life has been blessed by one story after another of experiences like this. One of them happened here. I have never spoken of it before. Twenty-two years later, it's about time.

I arrived in Columbus in March 1989 to serve the members of North Congregational Church on Henderson Road. Early in my time here, we had a meeting at First Church. I had never seen this church before. We have the words "Enter to Worship, Depart to Serve" chiseled over our Broad Street entrance. But for me and many who come in and out of this building, we enter by the 9th street door and depart by the 9th street - maybe serving, not really worshiping. Nevertheless, it is to worship God that we enter each time.

My first time through these doors was April 1989. We

had an early Easter that year, March 22, I believe. Some association meeting had brought me downtown. I entered by the east door. But, as is always my practice, I stop in the sanctuary of churches, mosques and synagogues to pray when I crossed their threshold for meetings. I believe that if God's people have felt called to build a house of prayer, I am called to praise God in their space of prayer. So I did the same here.

It was late afternoon. The sun was streaming through the west side windows when I walked in. I was absolutely swept away by the beauty and grandeur of this space. I went to the cross aisle and sat in the pew where Deb Anderson sits each week. In silence I beheld the windows and tapestries. But what caught my attention most of all, was the Ascension window, of which I speak today.

I smiled then and I still do to think the artist understood Jesus. Rising, sitting, almost Buddha-like, Jesus was true light from true light. Joy and gratitude overwhelmed me as I gave thanks to God for the men and women who built this place to God's glory! I knew nothing about First Church, Washington Gladden or any of you. I was simply grateful and joyful. And that was enough for me as tears of joy streamed down my face. As light touched the left side of face, I felt a peace that passes human understanding. I felt the love of God alive in this space. All was well with the world that day.

Never take for granted what a gift this place is. If you are to treasure her, if you are to take her into your heart, you must call her home and treat her as home. You must come and receive light upon light through these glorious windows and soak up the grace, the love and the peace of our gothic beauty. You must open yourself to trust enough and be vulnerable enough to be healed. You must not be afraid of the worst of what might happen to you. Like Christ, name and claim the worst and receive the embrace and healing touch of God's resurrection hope. Then, as you have received blessings, serve with grace and gratitude.

Do not become like her stones - hard and cold. Rather, become like her windows - streaming light and love, grace and joy- for this is our grand beauty's greatest gift to you. It is love, grace and truth wrapped up in cathedral glass and God's true light.

Stained Glass Artist and poet, Suzanne Cooper has written **In Hushed Cathedrals**. Please listen:

IN HUSHED CATHEDRALS

By Suzanne Cooper

*In hushed cathedrals
vivid images dance on ancient
stone floors worn smooth by kneeling.
Sunlight through
bits of colored glass
weaving patterns
on faces of worshipers.
Singing praises to the sun.
Colors dance,
soothing eyes and warming souls.
In hushed cathedrals
vivid images dance on ancient
stone floors worn smooth by kneeling.
Someone.
Unknown.
Craftsmen of ages past,
leaving legacies of
beauty in glass.
Generations blend
in timeless marches,
worshiping, awed,
inspired by ancient glass.
Generations sharing unknown bonds,
embraced by arms of colored light.*

Be embraced by “arms of colored light” reaching out to you through ancient glass and timeless truths. In our

hushed cathedral, receive the beauty and grace that God wants to give you. He offers these gifts with open arms. So, be not afraid. Come and receive the grace, the love, the light of God. Here in our hushed cathedral, be transformed. Amen.

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