

# “Coming Down from the Mountain”

Exodus 34:29-35, Psalm 99, II Corinthians 3:12-4:2;  
Luke 9:28-43a

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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, February 27, 2022, Transfiguration Sunday, dedicated to our 2022 Confirmand Sebbi Kulwicki, to Lola Davis Edwards to celebrate her 99th Birthday, to Luke Bendick on his Big Ten Championship victory in the Pole Vault, to the Ukrainian people in their battle against the Russian invasion and those in Russia fighting back against their oppressive leadership and always to the glory of God!

This is a story that opens on a high and holy mountain and ends in the valley of human need. Luke takes us from Transfiguration Mountain to Healing Valley. From pure light to healing light, I invite you to come along for the journey.

**“Coming Down from the Mountain”**

Exodus 34:29-35, Psalm 99, II Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-43a

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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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To the Native American Lakota Sioux Nation, society is experienced as a spiral. At the outer edge of the spiral are those too young to know many stories, too recently born to have experienced very much. This outside of the spiral is alive – but not yet quite real. The little

ones on the outside carry promise and the potential of reality, but they have not yet wound their way into the story.

A few spirals further in are their parents. They are older. They know more stories. They are more real – more substantial – and their potential, their promise has begun to take shape. Deeper into the spiral are the elders – grandparents and great-grandparents – who have gone round the circle of years many more times and know more stories and older ones. They are real and substantial in a way that young ones must learn to understand. When they speak, the young ones are to listen and learn.

But what really matters in the Sioux spiral is that it doesn't stop with the oldest living elders in the inner circles. The spiral into society and reality goes on deeper, into the stories older than any person alive and present in the family. It goes deeper and deeper into the stories that are older than that, and the deeper the spiral turns the deeper and older the stories become. The oldest stories possess the deepest degree of reality. The most solid substance goes back before the time of even the oldest elders – generation by generation – to the time when stories first were told.

Because this is Native American spirituality, intermingled with the spirals of human society across time are the figures that also spiral – snakes and lizards, rivers, rocks and sand, raging tornados and hurricanes. All of creation wraps itself in powerful spirals of life and unleashes itself in the seasons of the earth.

**Let's be clear about the spiral.** While our native sisters and brothers wind the spiral into their understanding of family, society, creation and all life, they are not the only ones. According to writing of anthropologist José Luis Cardero, *“The Celts and many ancient peoples*

*used spirals to represent the concept of the Great Cosmic River of the Universe.”* And the spiral is the basic configuration of the chakras (wheels or vortexes of subtle energy) in the body and symbolize a change in scale, or even a portal to another dimension. In other words, the spiral is a symbol of the spiritual path to be traveled in life (not unlike the labyrinth). This symbol is one of the first representations that have been found in Paleolithic caves and is constantly repeated throughout history of life on this planet.

As I read the story of Transfiguration of Jesus in Luke’s gospel, I think of the innermost spirals of time and reality which the ancient Lakota Sioux believe is real things happen. We are near the outer edge. Peter, James and John are more real than any character in this narrative of pure light. Even more real than them is Jesus, who is still a young man in this story when he meets the most real of all – Elijah and Moses. When they show up, they are characters from the oldest stories of the Jews. As we know, each ascended into the essence of God by being lifted up and carried away. The oldest characters we imagine we can meet in the New Testament have just been outdone by figures not only from a millennium earlier, but by figures that ARE the stories older than the oldest stories. They are very close to the center of the spiral – the creation of the universe.

In this spiral view of reality, the oldest stories, the oldest figures are the most real of all. Imagine that. Imagine that today, we are not witnessing a hologram or the ghost of Hamlet’s father – present but insubstantial. Rather, on the high and holy mountain, in the fullness of time, the full representations of all the prophets and the law-giver are revealed as real and absolutely connected to each one of us – even those youngest and smallest among us on the outer rim of the

spiral. Their stories connect to each one of us as real – not imagined, not mythical – real.

**And why not?** Isn't it simply a lack of imagination and a dearth of deep spiritual connectedness that keeps us apart from Peter, James, John, Jesus, Moses and Elijah? If we fail to see these connections in the spiral of life and time, maybe what is really missing is our ability to imagine our timeless connections to mystery and power in the creative design of God's immense universe.

**This is a real story – as real as real can be** – if you use our new understanding into this time. A mistake often made as preachers of this text is our failure to recognize the full extraordinariness (and realness) of this transfiguring event. Instead, we as proclaimers of God's word throughout time have tried to fit this story into the contours of our limited experience.

Let's face it – this story of Transfiguration is among the most utterly unique passages in holy scripture. Like Peter, James and John before us, we want to build our shrines and compare this our own "mountaintop experiences" to this one. To do this is to treat this as commonplace when it is truly transformational. It is to treat this – if you will – as outer spiral story instead of the core story that it is!

Jesus, Moses and Elijah are **changed into pure light** while God cries out from the mountaintop, *"This is my Son. My Chosen. Listen to him!"* God hasn't spoken like that since Jesus' baptism. This is so stunning and so surreal, even the three disciples are speechless. Once God's voice has clarified this Powerful Truth, Moses and Elijah move on. As beautiful as our mountaintop experiences may have been, this one is unparalleled. It is THE mountaintop experience.

As the spiral turns tighter and tighter, and the ancestors and true lights of our faith shine brighter and brighter, the spiral unwinds a bit as it all comes to an end. Jesus and the three disciples all walk down from the mountain of Transfiguration and enter the valley of discipleship. Once in the valley, those in need of healing and cleansing come running up to Jesus. In the verse we just heard, Jesus gets mad at the disciples. He has given them all the gifts for healing and they didn't heal this child. He yells at them first and says, "bring the boy to me." Jesus doesn't get a vacation after changing to pure light. He doesn't get a day off. He doesn't get a sabbath rest. He returns to his ministry where he administers healing light.

It reminds me of a story I once heard Bon Jovi tell. Returning from a concert tour in which he sold out the largest auditoriums and stadiums in the world, he finds a note on the kitchen counter that read – "Hey BJ. Please take out the garbage and recycling. See you in the morning when you have some chores to catch up on." Yikes. So much for a high moment.

Life is like that. No matter what our peak experiences have been, we eventually come down to earth to take out the garbage and work our "to do lists."

So here we are – having come down the mountain of Transfiguration. We come down the mountain and find ourselves in a deep valley. For our times, in this week, we find ourselves in a valley where evil has been unleashed. For the first time in 83 years, a full-out war is raging with the unmitigated attack of Russia against their non-aggressive neighbor Ukraine. It would be like the USA attacking Canada.

Taking a page from Adolph Hitler's world domination playbook, Vladimir Putin attacked Ukraine full force early Thursday morning.

Lying and claiming a threat which was no threat at all, Putin simultaneously attacked no less than 12 Ukrainian cities by air, sea and land. Not since the Nazi's under Hitler rolled into Poland in September, 1939, has Europe seen such an unjust onslaught. This morning as we worship, Ukrainian soldiers and armed volunteers are literally fighting for their lives, for their families and for the sovereignty and freedom of their democratically elected nation as they defend the nation's capital city of Kyiv. Meanwhile, across the border bold Russians are bravely protesting and being arrested as they cry out against Putin's evil acts.

As we stand on the outside looking in, we see the spiraling story which winds its way through Ukrainian history – a history rife with horrible antisemitism and hate. The worst attack on Jews since the Bible happened in Ukraine from 1648-1658 during which time as many as 100,000 Jews were killed and 300 villages were destroyed. During the Holocaust of the 1930s and 40s it is believed that 1.5 million Jews were killed – including 34,000 who were executed by the Nazis at Babi Yar, a ravine outside of Kyiv on Sept. 29-30, 1941. It was the single largest mass killing during the Holocaust. No monument stands over Babi Yar. Only a steep cliff now marks the place of horror.

As the story spirals, Ukraine is led by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. He is a Jewish comedian. Outside of Israel, Ukraine is the only nation in the world led by a Jewish president. And as we go deeper into the spiral of this living story, let us remember that the Ukrainians have had their own national tragedies. The modern story of Ukraine bears witness to the twin bestialities of both the Nazis and the Soviets.

Stalin's Five-Year Plan decimated Ukraine. In 1933, in the greatest humanly caused famine in history, Ukrainians would die in the millions. During the years that both Stalin and Hitler were in power, more people were killed in Ukraine than anywhere else in Europe, or in the world. Stalin, like Putin now, did not see the Ukrainians as human – but as property of Russia.

As Timothy Snyder writes in *“Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning,”* Hitler thought the Slavs were subhuman. He wanted Ukraine's fertile lands. Between 1933 and 1945, the Nazi and Soviet regimes deliberately murdered around 14 million civilians in the “blood lands,” the region that extends from central Poland to western Russia, through Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic States.

The Ukrainians' spiraling story is deep and packed with stories of death and survival, of heroes and villains. Today, we stand at the outer edge of this spiral and learn from the center that the spirits and stories of this people are real and they are powerful and they will go unheard and unheeded. They will not yield. They will not surrender. They are warriors who will stand and fight. And we cannot forsake or forget them. We have to stand up and stand with them.

I close with a story, as retold by Yaffa Eliach in *“Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust.”* The story is about something that happened in the Janowska work camp, which was near Lviv, Ukraine during the Second World War.

The Nazis forced the Jews in the camp to dig a huge pit, and then forced them to leap across. Those who successfully made the jump would live; those who fell into the pit would meet their deaths.

Two men stood at the edge of a pit: the rabbi of Bluzhov, Rabbi Israel Spira, and a friend, who was a freethinker, an anti-religious Jew. Even though neither man was in great physical shape, they both jumped, and they both made it across the pit.

*“How did you do it?”* the freethinker asked the rabbi.

The rabbi replied: *“I was holding on to my ancestral merit. I was holding on to the coattails of my father, and my grandfather and my great-grandfather, of blessed memory.”*

*“But, you, my friend?”* the rabbi asked. *“How did you reach the other side?”*

The rabbi’s friend answered: *“I was holding on to you.”*

May this tale told close to the center of the spiral, from a work camp in Ukraine, give us all courage to leap across the pits of despair that we face and that others are up against. And may we find other people to hold on to as we do. And may we walk through the valley hanging on to our Ukrainian sisters and brothers in the days before us. Amen.

