

“Listen to Him,”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI

2 Corinthians 4:3-6, Mark 9:2-9 Sermon
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For Private Distribution Only

It was probably 10 years ago this June that I attended my first Vision Quest in Colorado. I went not as a participant, but to support my best friend and her spiritual community as they fasted, prayed, and slept alone on a hill, encircled by strings of prayer ties stuffed with sacred tobacco, in full view of bears and other critters. Because I had to join the group late, I had no choice but to navigate the 2-1/2 hour trip on my own. As many of you know, I tend to be a little directionally challenged. And so it will come as no surprise to you that I lost my way somewhere south of Denver and didn't near my destination until long after dark. Now the town of Fairplay falls right along a fairly major scenic route, just beyond a beautiful mountain pass. It's not difficult to locate once you're on the right track. But a vision quest wouldn't be much of a challenge if it were held right in town. No, the space this faith community had set aside for its sacred ceremonies fell not within civilization's boundaries, but 5 or 10 miles within undeveloped ranch land. Aside from the occasional pick-up truck flying by on the unpaved main road, there were no signs of life but the occasional herd of cows. And not a single street light.

At a certain point in my convoluted journey through the ranch wilderness, it occurred to me that it was going to be awfully difficult to find the group in utter darkness. My car's headlights weren't really cutting it, and there were no landmarks to speak of anyway! No one had told me precisely how far it was from the entrance to the turn-off to their land. Cell phones did not work in this remote area. And so I began to panic and pulled over to the side of the road. Should I just sleep there overnight and try again in daylight? I wondered. It was a tempting and seemingly rational choice. But I quickly recognized that darkness and flying pick-up trucks were a

potentially lethal combination for a compact car parked along the side of the road. More and more frightened at this point, I prayed for help and kept driving. Maybe I drove for another 10 minutes, maybe 20. I can't really say.

But eventually a *glow* emerged in the valley far ahead of me. I relaxed a bit, and followed it. I had nothing else to go on. But, *almost more than that*, this glow reminded me of a nightlight in an unfamiliar place—so comforting and reassuring even if I still wasn't sure exactly where I was going. When finally I reached its source, the glow revealed itself to be a campfire covered by a teepee in order to comply with fire regulations. I was *fairly sure* I was in the right place. But I was 100% certain when my friend, illuminated by the teepee at her back, was the first person to approach.

As I recapped the story of my misadventure and basked in the warmth of that teepee nightlight, it became clear to me that, regardless of my fears, I hadn't been alone or rudderless on the road at all. God was within and all around me. And eventually there was the community, veiled at first, perhaps, but shining brightly nonetheless. Sometimes when I am frightened or lost, I remind myself of that experience and try to re-experience how I felt when I finally emerged out of the darkness in the exact right place. It is part of my own personal spiritual journey, which, in some small way, reassures me. Perhaps *a little* like the hope that comes for many through remembering the story of Israel's exodus out of Egypt... I can't help but wonder whether Peter, James, and John didn't also reflect back upon Jesus' Transfiguration as they lived through Holy Week: the odd parade of Palm Sunday, the communion and betrayal of Maundy Thursday, the trauma and death of Good Friday, and the empty tomb shocker of Easter. And, indeed, I suspect that was at least *a part* of Jesus' intention, for in each of the 3 synoptic gospels he was

transfigured several days after confiding to the disciples his upcoming crucifixion, death, and resurrection.

That image of divine light shining through him in his whiter than white robe as he conversed with 2 of the greatest Hebrew prophets highlighted *another facet of the story*: the glory that was in Jesus and the sacrifice he would make in order to illuminate the love and justice-seeking that define God and will eventually triumph over *all* manner of darkness...

What does it mean to *transfigure* anyway? It's not a word we often, if ever, use outside of this particular day on the church calendar. Some would consider *transform* to be a synonym. And I suppose it is. But it falls a little short, I think. The word "transfigured" is closely related to the Greek word *metamorphosis*, which means "assuming a different form."¹ Did Jesus become someone or something that, up until that day, he was not? Like a run-of-the-mill caterpillar, which eventually emerges from a cocoon as a colorful butterfly? ...No and yes...I would venture to say that that unlikely image of Jesus on the mountaintop served to illuminate his true essence-- what had always been there, but was mostly veiled by his modest demeanor and circumstances. Not entirely unlike the caterpillar, which always did have butterfly genes, whether or not the human eye could see them.

And yet, even illuminated, Jesus' identity and purpose still seemed to stymie these disciples. They are terrified, and Peter, the spokes-apostle, is babbling, stumbling all over himself as first he calls the divine Son "rabbi"-- "teacher"-- and then offers to build shrines for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Perhaps he was just releasing some nervous energy. But maybe he was also stalling

¹ McKenzie, Alyce M. "The Shining: Reflections on the Transfiguration of Jesus." *Edgy Exegesis*, February 13, 2012

for time, trying to make this awesome, unbelievable moment last and, barring that, to leave behind monuments to capture and commemorate it... But no such luck. The moment was gone. Moses and Elijah have disappeared. And it was time to go back down the mountain, to the dusty streets and the crowds of all those hungry, hurting people. The “real” world.

But wait a second. In between this sequence of events there was the voice of God, coming from the clouds just after Peter’s shrine proposal. “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” the voice commanded. Don’t get too caught up in this magnificent light show. Listen carefully to Jesus. Focus... If you think God was telling Peter to shut up, you’re probably right. I would guess Peter was so worked up at that point that a stern message was the only one he could actually hear. Seriously, this vision was not some TMZ photo opportunity. And Jesus didn’t need any monument or fancy shrine from Peter. What Jesus needed were his ears listening, his feet on the ground, and, eventually, when Jesus was gone, his hands touching and healing and his mouth bearing witness.

Soon the cross would demonstrate that *Jesus’ glory* was of a very different sort than that of earthly kings. And this ministry would always be about moving forward, transfiguring lives, and inching toward the glory of God’s coming realm of universal justice and compassion. Certainly memory, history, and tradition would undergird the movement. But they were not and are not ultimately the point. As we know from looking back at some of the fashions of our youth—be it big hair, Dr. Scholl’s sandals, leg warmers or whatever—relics of the past can get stale and even irrelevant. The point is not to stop in our tracks, but to continually meet people where they are *today*...and respond to their needs accordingly.

So exactly where *are* people today? Largely not in church. According to Diana Butler Bass, author of *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, in a typical week, less than a quarter of Americans attend a religious service, down from the half of the population who were regular churchgoers a generation ago. And, in 1999, when a survey asked Americans "Do you consider yourself spiritual or religious," a solid majority of 54% responded that they were "religious but not spiritual." By 2009, only 9% of Americans responded that way. I wonder whether a number of us might find ourselves in the other 91%, were we to take that survey today. Between 9/11, the Catholic clergy sex abuse scandals, and the encroachment of religious Fundamentalism into our political process, "religion" has gotten a bad rap over the past decade. And perhaps deservedly so... And so we might prefer to associate ourselves with the 48% of the population who now identify as "spiritual *and* religious." In this equation, "religion" is a synonym for institutional religion, while spirituality connotes an *experience* of faith.² Note that it is *spirituality* that comes first.

Butler Bass, who studied vital congregations while she was writing *Christianity for the Rest of Us* can tell us firsthand that congregations exhibiting a vibrant spiritual life that embodies a living faith are succeeding in practical terms as well, even in this religion bear market. Today she says,

'Spiritual and religious' expresses a grassroots desire for new kinds of faith communities... Americans are searching for churches -- and temples, synagogues, and mosques -- that are not caught up in political intrigue, rigid rules and prohibitions, institutional maintenance, unresponsive authorities, and inflexible dogma but instead offer pathways of life-giving spiritual experience, connection, meaning, vocation, and doing justice in the world.³

²Bass, Diana Butler: "The End of Church." www.huffingtonpost.com. February 18, 2012.

³Ibid.

...I have a feeling many of us would like that as well. And maybe even feel our church is well positioned to do and to be just that.... I certainly do. But I have also come to recognize the nugget of truth in that well known definition of insanity often attributed to Albert Einstein. That is, insanity is doing the same things over and over and expecting different results.

When was the last time we climbed a mountain together and glimpsed holiness face to face?
When was the last time we got quiet together and just listened for the voice of God in our midst?
What might that look like? How might those experiences impact and shape our lives, together and in the larger community? I think we might be surprised at *just how profoundly* it could transform and even transfigure us. The energy and creativity that could be ignited, even as we are coming back down the mountain to live our daily lives in the “real world,” with all its earthly traumas, aches, and pains.

When I was between Evangelical and Progressive Christianity on my faith journey and actively seeking, I delighted in the meditation practices I learned from the Buddhists at the Shambhala Center, as well as the rituals I witnessed amongst friends who practiced earth based spiritualities. I thought, “Ah, *this* is what is missing from Christianity! I’ve found what I’ve been thirsting for all along!” Then, while I was in seminary, I studied spiritual direction with the Benedictine sisters, and my eyes were opened once again. Centering and contemplative prayer have been practiced by Christians from very early on. They have a lot in common with meditation. And we do have rituals, of course: the sacraments of communion and baptism. But fasting and giving things up during Lent have at least a couple of parallels to the Lakota vision quests I witnessed. And these need not be the only rituals we practice. We have a degree of freedom to dream up new practices, rituals unique to our own community and its spiritual needs...

...If Christianity is indeed a resurrection religion, then as an institution we are bound to continually die and rise again, to emerge in some new form that lives in the present with an eye toward the future, yet is firmly grounded in our past.

We began Epiphany with the light of bright star in the sky leading the way to Jesus' birthplace. We end the season with Jesus himself illuminated on a mountaintop. We live much of our lives in the in-between time when such signs and wonders can seem scarce. The road coarse and rocky. The journey long and lonely. The route unclear. But there is Christ light behind and before us and, indeed, within us, to guide us. And, even if, like Peter, we don't always clearly understand God's designs, there is a plan. God wills each and every one of us to transfigure, to reveal our true essences, to shed our earthbound caterpillar bodies and take on butterfly wings. And God wills the same for the church, for this congregation and the institution. Metamorphosis.

Let us remember these things as we head into a season of contemplation: The Lenten journey that leads up a mountain, to the cross, and finally renders us Easter people. Let us ponder what we are willing to give and give up in the name of ongoing vitality, healing, and transformation for ourselves, one another, and those who stand outside our doors. To ensure this family grows in depth and number alike. And lives on for many generations to come. Let us get quiet and listen. Listen for the voice of our Still-speaking God...and the voice of Christ's spirit, which lives within us.

Amen.