

A Sermon for Transfiguration Sunday – February 11, 2018 – CALLED TO RESURRECTION

Hanapepe United Church of Christ, Kauai, Hawaii

Text – Mark 9:2-9

Dedicated to the Good People of St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Dubuque, Iowa, its team of wonderful musicians and singers, and to the memory of Jennifer Purdy

When I was a kid growing up in a Methodist church in a northwestern Iowa county seat town, about the only special church days I remember being celebrated were Christmas and Easter. There was no Advent in those days, and frankly not much of a Lent as I recall either. Oh, Palm Sunday got a nod, but I don't think the rest of Holy Week was much observed. We just went from the little triumph of Palm Sunday right to the big day of Easter! And other special days, well, they simply got totally ignored, much less observed.

It was only when the Roman Catholics rejuvenated things with Vatican II that mainline Protestants like the Methodists, Presbyterians, and UCC, discovered things like church seasons and colors and special days, and, oh, the lectionary too.

So celebrating a day like Transfiguration Sunday was something I had never done for most of my life. Even after we Protestants re-discovered the church calendar, I pretty much stayed clear of the Transfiguration. It's an off text. It feels like a scene from a sci-fi movie. It is shrouded in mystery and magic

and the supernatural. It was disorienting to Jesus' disciples, and it still confuses us as readers, with all its pyrotechnics and voices from above.

When the transfiguration began to play a significant role in my understanding of who Jesus is started happening almost thirty years ago now. Yet it feels only like yesterday. I had arrived at a new church appointment in the summer of 1990, at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, in the Mississippi River city of Dubuque, Iowa. It was an amazing church. A limestone and granite Protestant cathedral outfitted entirely with original Tiffany stained glass windows and a massive pipe organ and a music program that was second to none. I quickly learned the depth of the musical talent and creativity there and also discovered that one of my members, the son of the church's organist, was the leader of a great Dixieland style jazz band.

Somewhere I had read about churches that held jazz worship services and even observed Mardi Gras before Lent began. So I presented the idea to the worship team, and while they were highly trained classical church musicians, they reluctantly gave in to their new young pastor and his idea and agreed to hold a Mardi Gras service on the Sunday before Lent began in 1991. As I recall, that date for Transfiguration Sunday came pretty early that year.

What we did not count on was that just a few weeks before the date for this service, shortly into the start of a cold January, a young woman from the

church was killed in an accident in Spain where she was spending the year as a Rotary foreign exchange student. Her father was a very active Rotarian and the whole family was hugely involved in the life of the church, as had this daughter of theirs. Her tragic death at age 18, and the subsequent funeral, set the whole church a-reeling. And their new pastor too. And then it was Transfiguration Sunday – Mardi Gras. The Dixieland band had been booked to play the service. The choir and musicians had been working since before Christmas on music. A Cajun-style dinner had been planned as a fundraiser for our church's youth ministry and its annual mission work trip to Appalachia, something this girl and her family had been much involved in.

But should we do this? Should we go ahead? Were we even in the mood for it? Most of the worship team was hesitant. But the decision was made to proceed. And we did. And when the day was over, the church's organist – a hugely talented, classically trained musician, said that while she had had her doubts, it was worship. It was worship! The family of the young woman was also pleased, and actually 27 years later, St. Luke's continues to observe a Mardi Gras service and dinner on this Sunday, something which pleases me immensely.

So what is about this day of Transfiguration that captures our hearts and minds on the threshold of Lent? I've never quite been able to get my theological and liturgical finger on a precise answer, but I think it has something to do with wonder, with our questions about where Earth ends

and heaven begins,. I think that's why the day worked back in 1991 at that Iowa church which was still walking in the valley of the shadow of death. I think this day has something about it that Leonard Cohen captured in a line from one of his greatest poem/songs: "There is a crack in everything/ that's how the light gets in."

There certainly was a crack in the life of a family and a church back in 1991. And perhaps this day and its message let a little light in. Here, amid all our own perplexities and questions about life and death and what it all means, about what everything finally adds up to in the end, we encounter this strange and mysterious mountaintop story before Jesus himself descended into the valley of his own shadowed death. And what does it say to us? What do we see here in it about God and about God's realm?

Here in the luminal spaces between our very limited and finite humanity and Christ's infinite and unlimited divinity, this story engages us and invites us to perceive a new reality that can transform our existing broken one. I think that is what happened 27 years ago when my church heard this story amid the veil of grief.

This story helps us answer the most fundamental question we must ask as believers – who is Jesus? And it also invites us to ask a related one – who are we? Here in a story of cloud and light and voices, the message is affirming, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him."

In our days of grief and pain, in times of puzzlement and worry, and yes, even on days when most things seem right with the world, we are searching for something – for someone – to follow and to trust.

It must have been liberating for those first disciples to know that their instincts about leaving their former lives behind and following this countercultural teacher and healer around the countryside were correct. The resonated with the love he displayed, with the inclusion he taught, with the integrity he embodied. He taught, they said, as one with authority!

So on that day on that mountaintop, seeing what they saw and hearing what they heard, they were probably feeling assured. But what to do with that?

Their answer was to try to preserve the moment by building them all a place to live and from which to teach. That way they could tell everyone they knew what they saw and heard as a confirmation of what they had always felt to be true.

But that was not the answer. Just preserving and spreading Jesus' teaching was not the answer, as good as that might be. Something bigger, something greater, was still to come, and they needed to witness that too. There was something more powerful than cloud and light that still needed to be proclaimed" and that something was resurrection. And getting to resurrection meant coming down from the mountaintop high they were on and descending into the valley full of shadows, of upper room and garden

and cross and tomb. There was still for them much to be seen and to hear and to do.

So like those disciples with Jesus on the mountain, we get a glimpse of glory, just enough to pocket for the time that will come when glory isn't quite so evident, when the path is not so clear, when the way is stormy, and the night's darkness nearly blots out all the light. We know those moments, don't we? They are real. They come from time to time, intruding, exposing, disrupting. Ending of a job or a relationship. More demands on our time or our resources. An illness. A death. We know this stuff. They happen to us in the valleys where we live and move and have our being.

And when they come as they do, as they came back in 1991 for that church and that family in a tragic, untimely death of a vibrant young woman, or as they come to us in a myriad of ways and forms to knock us off balance and take our breath away, we need moments of glory, glimpses really like this day gives –n on the mountain, where we, like the early disciples, are called not just to teach and practice the ethics of Jesus, but also to spread the hope of resurrection, a faith that love conquers all mortal powers, even the power of death.

Big bright days like this one are precisely for times when our hearts have become too small. Days like this one of mystery and awe are there precisely

for times when our lives and actions are too contained to spread the power of Christ in the world.

It may all seem fantastical, even unreal, but God shines with the perfection of beauty, grabbing our attention in the extremes of our earthly experiences, reminding us that nothing in our perception is outside of divine reality. We are witnesses to the divine power of resurrection, but we have to travel through Lent to get there, to walk the valley of the shadow of death in order to find the light shining.

Today is a day to feast before we fast, to rejoice before we repent, to live before we die, to glimpse if even for a moment, what resurrection looks like in our hearts, in our lives, and in our relationships, so that on the journey to the cross, we might harbor somewhere deep down inside us the resurrection power of God. Yes, we are called to resurrection.

Let us pray in the words of Tom Troeger's hymn:

Lord, transfigure our perception

With the purest light that shines

And recast our life's intentions

To the shape of your designs,

Til we seek no other glory

Than what lies past Calvary's hill

And our living and our dying

And our rising by your will. Amen.

