

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

3 March 2019

Transfiguration Sunday

Last Sunday after Epiphany

Hebrew Scripture: Exodus 34:29-35

Christian: Luke 9:28-36

“A Presence Too Powerful to Deny”



One of lessons taught in divinity school is: ‘When determining what to preach about, look for new information in the story not found elsewhere in the other gospels. Find that which is different. It was put there for a reason. It means something. Preach on that.’



So, let us do that! Mark is the earliest written gospel. We will use Mark's story of the Transfiguration as our foundation (Mark 9:2-13). Luke's story is the one we read today. If we read Mark and Luke, we hear that the disciples and Jesus went up onto a mountain. We learn that Jesus' face and clothes turned a bright white. Then, Elijah and Moses spoke to Jesus. Then, we are told that Peter suggested to build booths, or shelters.



Yet in this similarly told narrative, Luke inserts the following before suggesting the building of the booths. "Peter and his companions were very sleepy" - one translation has it that "they were weighed down by sleep" (Luke 9:32).



That is a very particular wording that must mean something very, well, particular. So, there we find our first anomaly, new information in Luke not found in Mark, this morning. What meaning does the disciple's fatigue and sleepiness have for us?

If you all are super clever, and I know you are, we know that for Luke the disciples being sleepy foreshadows the Garden of Gethsemane. Remember before Christ's betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus was in prayerful conversation with his father in heaven just as Jesus was in prayer in conversation with Moses and Elijah? The fact that the same thing happens twice means something to Luke.

For Luke, sleepiness is a metaphor for living in denial. For Luke, sleepiness means living in denial.



What is it that the disciples were denying? May I put it to you that the disciples were denying what it meant to follow Jesus? What does it mean to follow Jesus? Well, let us read the scripture immediately before Luke's

telling of the Transfiguration: “One must deny oneself and take up the cross daily. You must lose your life” (Luke 9:23-25).



Being sleepy or sleeping for Luke is the equivalent of plugging in our ears and saying “Lalalalalalalalala”. It is T.M.I. - Too Much Information. Being sleepy, or sleeping, communicates to the reader that for the disciples the consequences of following Jesus was too much to accept - so they ignored, or denied the reality with which they were confronted. Calvin once denied that he was in denial:



Friends, truth be told, we all become overwhelmed by implications of the gospel.



If all of us were to know and feel the pain of the vast majority of this world who live in abject poverty, it would be too much to bear.



If all of us learned of, and consequently felt the pain of, millions of lives devastated by wars fueled by our tax dollars and foreign policy in Vietnam and the Middle East, by arms manufacturers and defense contractors' need to be in a state of perpetual war, we would need to be in therapy for the rest of our lives or be driven to suicide.



If we were to absorb the trauma of heterocentrism and patriarchy for thousands of years, the pain of Native Americans, and the trauma of

people of color shipped as slaves for hundreds of years, it would be too much to bear.



Indeed, if we were to witness and contemplate the torture of hundreds, on even just one slave ship, we might as a response, vomit. Indeed, to contemplate, to cast our eyes upon, the glory of the Lord, the perfection of God and the majesty of our Creator, *in comparison with our sinful selves*, it would overwhelm us; it would drive us mad; it would ultimately kill us. That is why the ancients believed that God could never be seen and even those like Moses, who partially saw, had to wear a veil so as to not overwhelm the Hebrew people. So that we do not become overwhelmed, we deny reality and the implications of our gospel.



Ched Meyers eloquently stated, “We are surrounded without and spiritually formed within by a culture of upwardly mobile aspirations, willful neglect of the poor, and social and political violence of all kinds. Yet most middle-class Christians in North America have made a strategic détente with this world; we are simply too content to follow Jesus into a conflict with business-as-usual. We are sleepy, or we sleep in denial”.¹



The second insertion that Luke included not found in the other accounts of the Transfiguration is the actual discussion taking place between Moses, Elijah and Jesus. The other gospels only mention a discussion, but Luke included ‘about what’. Specifically, Luke tells us the discussion was about “his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem”. Our second and last lesson from Luke’s curious insertion is that we are called from our sleepiness to be in community.

¹ Ched Myers, “Transfiguration Sunday (Last Sunday after Epiphany)” in *Preaching God’s Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year C Featuring 22 New Holy Days for Justice*, Andrews, Dale, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm and Ronald Allen, eds., (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), pp. 117.



The Greek word 'departure' here is '*tèn exodon*' (exodus). For Moses the exodus was for the Hebrews. Moses led the people to liberation. Jesus' exodus is rather for *all people*, for the world. I believe Luke included the contents of Jesus' discussion with Moses and Elijah because they spoke about community, about the liberation of the world as a community.



Jesus leads all people, in fact the world, and all Creation, to liberation. So, this conversation was not about personal salvation, not for Jesus, not for the three individual disciples - but rather for all. Jesus' departure, Jesus' exodus, was personal, it was communal. It was not *his* departure, not *his* liberation alone - but ours, all of ours, collectively. Hence, to be Christian is not to liberate our individual selves, it is not to preserve and

strengthen only this church, Centre Church. Rather, it is to participate in a much larger project - it is to participate in the liberation of the world - 'so God loved it'! (John 3:16)



Friends, we learn from Luke's version of the Transfiguration not to be sleepy, not to deny the pain and anguish in which we find the world. We are called to not deny our role as followers of Jesus, no matter the sacrifice. And second, we know that in not denying this ministry, we are not liberating just our individual selves in some kind of private saving of our souls. Rather, we engage in the liberation of all of God's people and Creation, together, communally.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".