

# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from February 18, 2007

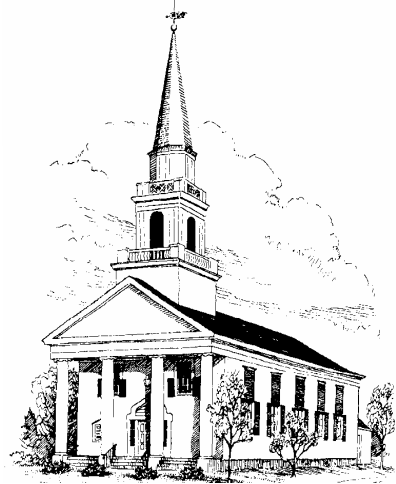
Rev. Patricia L. Liberty

### “Changed and Changing”

Scriptures:

**Exodus 34:29-35**

**Luke 9:28-36**



**A** more apt name for my sermon this morning might be “Altar Call Envy” as I found myself yearning for those moments that celebrate places of clarity in the journey of discipleship ... moments when the expansive rhythms of grace connect us to the power of God and the joy of discipleship.

At various times in my religious life, I have found my way to churches that issue altar calls. There comes a point in the service where the pastor invites those who desire to commit their life to Jesus Christ to come forward for prayer and a blessing. Though I suspect I understand that somewhat differently than the other pilgrims who shuffled down the aisle with me to have hands laid on, it is nonetheless a gift that has nurtured parts of my journey, mostly as a way to anchor my understanding of God’s claim on my life and the changing seasons of my own willingness to answer.

There are few, if any, rituals in historic Protestantism that mark those kinds of moments of insight, grace and growth that come in the context of our journey. We have lost the language, or perhaps given it away, to those who speak of being born again. It is language that makes us very nervous.

We are rightfully scared of those who claim a corner on the market of divine truth and then codify such moments in narrow beliefs and even narrower behavior. I doubt those fundamentalists had any idea who was schlepping down their aisle on Sunday morning. But I believe that we are also the poorer for having lost this edge in our worshipping life.

So, for a brief moment I considered an altar call this morning. But then I remembered that my time in your midst is short and I’m fairly sure that whatever Sunday I offered an altar call would be my last. So fear not, you are all safe in your own pews.

Whatever rituals we may lack, we do hold to a belief that God, God’s word, our own study and the fellowship of those who gather in God’s name has the capacity to change us, and that from time to time it does. Moreover we believe that the experiences of our lives apart from this place are also occasions of God’s appearing. When we come together for worship, gather at the font or at the table, we connect what happens here with what happens in the sacrament of daily life.

An altar call is simply a moment when those connections are celebrated in liturgy, and the seasons of our discipleship are given liturgical expression or a visible place in the life of community. It’s a way that we can acknowledge that the path remains constant even though our proximity to it changes throughout our lives.

Transfiguration is one of those moments of clarity in the lives of Peter, James and John. All of the synoptic gospels record the event in pretty much the same way. It's easy to get caught up in the details of the story, wondering what kind of heavenly hocus-pocus was going on and perhaps, by extension, why it doesn't happen in the same way for us today. After all, our own faith journeys would surely be made easier by a few cameo appearances from some of the spiritual giants of the past.

For Peter, James and John, Jesus was transfigured but they were the ones who were changed; Jesus' appearance was altered and so were they. It was a moment of insight about who Jesus really was. What came on the heels of that was what it meant for their own lives.

I don't think for a moment that it is coincidence that all of the major liturgical holidays we celebrate, Christmas and Easter and the minor ones, Epiphany, Pentecost and Transfiguration, are all in some way an acknowledgement of God's appearance and presence.

Christmas celebrates the incarnation—God in our midst; Easter celebrates God's with us forever; Pentecost celebrates God the spirit with us forever; and Transfiguration celebrates Jesus revealed in a new way. Each is an invitation to recognize God's appearing in our own lives and, like Peter James and John, acknowledge that we are changed. And of course we are. How many of us have our childhood image of God?

Daniel Clendenin in his outstanding book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, speaks of his growth in faith and writes of the Jesuses he has known. Last year, as a Lenten discipline, I took up his invitation to consider the Jesuses I have known.

There was the Jesus of my childhood—Swedish Jesus, blond hair, blue eyes, long flowing white gown with sandals, looking blissfully on the children who waited in line to sit on his knee.

Then there was the magical Jesus of my early adolescence—purveyor of all I hoped for, not only for myself but also for others. That didn't last long.

Then there was the Jesus of my later adolescence as I got involved in 4H and learned the joy of caring for sheep and pigs and cows and goats. I was convinced Jesus was a farmer.

The Jesus of my young adulthood was, not surprisingly, as angry as I was—Jesus turning over the tables in the temple was my story as I went out to save the world.

Gradually, I have come to the place where Jesus is the one whom I see in the faces of those around me and, from time to time, however dimly, in the face that is reflected in the mirror. It is an endless revelation of grace and an eternal invitation to discipleship. It works for now. Who knows where I'll be ten years from now.

Transfiguration is always an invitation to name moments of God's appearing in our own lives and acknowledge the changes it occasions.

Having said that, it's important to note that as a result of this experience, Peter James and John did not rocket to the head of the discipleship class. There was no sudden perfection conferred upon them. Peter remained impulsive and obstreperous, James and John continued to jockey for power and they all fell asleep at inopportune moments. But with their fears and their faith, all that they were and all that they failed to be, they stumbled along after Jesus sometimes close enough to hold the hem of his robe and sometimes desperately searching for footprints the wind erased in the sand. They remained

works in progress. If there is any good news to be heard today, that's probably it.

Moments of transfiguration are simply bread for the journey, morsels that nourish our spirits with a clearer sense of who God is, which means we can have a clearer sense of who we are. We tend to think of this story as a prototype for the "mountaintop" experiences we all long for—the feeling you get when standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon, the mind-blowing joy of counting the fingers and toes of your newborn child, and countless other moments of spiritual exhilaration that can keep us going for months.

That's not what this is about. A more faithful rendering of the text is one that connects us to the truth of who Jesus is in a very specific way—his power and authority, his wisdom and grace, his unshakeable love and goodness.

Jesus is as apt to be transfigured in the midst of our deepest sorrow as our deepest joy. Each moment of our lives is an occasion of his appearing—times when we know strength that is beyond our own strength, knowledge beyond our knowing, moments when healing lurks at the edges of our pain and joy waits on the outskirts of our brokenness.

The image of the mountaintop was a complex symbol in the ancient world. On the one hand, it was what connected Jesus to Moses and Elijah, to salvation history.

Both Moses and Elijah had significant experiences on the mountain top. This morning we heard of Moses who received the Ten Commandments on the mountaintop.

Elijah ended up on the mountaintop after he had delivered the message God had given him to say to the people. Like most prophets, he discovered that they didn't like it one bit. He hightailed it into the wilderness, running for his life, and climbed Mount Horeb. He stayed in a cave and received a message that told him the Lord was about to pass by.

We are told in First Kings that, "There was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks into pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind, an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake, a fire but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, the sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave."

Then the Lord spoke to Elijah and told him all that he should do. Elijah met with God in the silence of the mountaintop and that experience carried Elijah through the difficult task of being God's prophet.

In our text, the symbol of the mountaintop is what connects Jesus with Moses and Elijah. It was a place of power and the symbolism. It would not have been lost on Luke's first century hearers.

Beyond the obvious connection to power, there was a subtle tradition that also acknowledged that mountaintops were "thin places" where the boundaries between heaven and earth were most fragile. These two traditions come together in a vision of Jesus that not only allows him to take his place in salvation history but also altered Peter, James and John in ways that strengthened them for ministry.

So, it was not a "mountaintop" experience in the sense of a spiritual high as much as it was a way of clarifying who Jesus was, and then, by extension, clarifying who they were. Such moments clarify for us who we are.

The temptation is always to build institutions to the moment. “Let’s build our huts. We can stay here. We can rest in this great revelation.” But Jesus would have none of it because the work is always done after we make the trek back down again, back to the places where they and we live out the changes that are wrought by moments of insight. Jesus is transfigured but we are the ones who are changed.

Thanks be to God and amen.