

Rev. Michele Bagby Allan  
Sermon Shared at North Prospect Union, UCC  
Transfiguration Sunday, February 22, 2009

It is so good to be with you, to join you in worship. I realized as I was doing my homework, that it has been 10 years since I was student minister at North Prospect, UCC, and it was a little less than that when I was with you last as an Interim Associate Pastor in 2001. Time has flown, and in that time, I have served a church in California that rivals the length of the title of the church now, post merger. I served the United Congregational Christian Church, Lodi, CA, affiliated with The United Church of Christ and the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. Three and a half years ago, I was called to the United Church of Christ in North Hampton, where I am so happy that they are receiving the gift of Dudley's preaching today. I pray that it's a blessing both ways as we do this "pulpit swap".

Also in doing my homework, I realized that it was Valentine's Day, 1999, that I preached my 3<sup>rd</sup> sermon at North Prospect on Transfiguration Sunday. I have to admit to you that I was fairly convinced that Dudley had me preach as a student minister that Sunday because he just didn't like the Transfiguration text. But now that I know better, I don't think that was the case. I think that the Transfiguration text is one that challenges any pastor, any preacher, and particularly students. So, feel lucky, Tom, you got out of this one!

Since 1999, I am sure that I have not missed preaching on Transfiguration Sunday. It has become one of my favorite texts. It is one of my favorite between-Christmas-and-Easter high holy days of the church. So, today I will let you in on the secret. My colleagues think I'm nuts because I love Transfiguration Sunday! They think I'm crazy because this text is so flashy. It's so confusing. Worse yet, it's so slightly, or not so slightly, apocalyptic. It's a really great reminder of how dopey the disciples are. And often, pastors are challenged to know how to translate this flashy, this confusing, this sad-for-the-disciples text into the living out of our spirit today. I still respond to the colleagues and to you today, that I love the Transfiguration. Here's why...

Transfiguration is this collapsing of time and eternity. It is this compressing of so many stories into one story. It's like one of those "space bags." You know, the ones you see on TV where you get your vacuum cleaner and suck all of the air out of the bag so that you can fit three times as much stuff in your closet. You know these space bags, don't you? For only \$19.99 you can have seven of them, I'm sure. Maybe you can double that, if you're lucky. So as I was thinking about this text, I thought that maybe I would take the air out of the space bag, and let the clothes spill all over the place to remind you that there is so much to explore in this text. I pray that there is at least something that we can connect with when we decompress.

Here are the things that I see, and perhaps you see more than I.

There is that mountain top experience, the place where God is seen in this story (but not just in this story). Can you think of another mountaintop? Perhaps the one where the law is handed to Moses, or another where Jesus goes up the mountain to pray and to be with God?

There is the cloud that comes over them, sign of the revelation of God, and again there is allusion to Moses when there was the cloud, the revealing of the holy.

There is the voice, and we've heard that voice before saying "this is my beloved." It draws us into that story of baptism.

There is Moses and Elijah. Now, they are a little confusing to us for sure, but they are prophets, present with and a sign of the coming of the kingdom in Jewish

Rev. Michele Bagby Allan  
Sermon Shared at North Prospect Union, UCC  
Transfiguration Sunday, February 22, 2009

tradition. I was reminded as I was studying this text that Elijah, when Elisha is following him around waiting for him to be swept up, Elisha follows him to three places saying “I won’t leave you alone. When you go, give me a double portion of your blessing.” This story of the transfiguration falls in the Gospel of Mark in the midst of the three predictions of Jesus’ death and departure. I don’t think that’s a mistake.

Can you think of any more? Am I missing the piece of the story that is critical to your heart today? You can shout it out if it’s coming, but if not, it’s okay. There is so much here.

There is the prediction of Christ’s end, but not just of the cross, but also of the resurrection with those dazzling robes.

I wonder if you can appreciate all of this compressed action in just 7 verses in Mark. Much like the whole Mark experience with its 16 chapters squishing the whole story in that can’t be contained.

Today, as we look at this text and as we reflect upon it, I have been wondering, what does it have to say to us today?

When I was 11 years old, I went to summer camp. Did anyone here ever go to summer camp? We have a few summer campers here. Summer camp in Northern California where I grew up wasn’t for the faint of heart. It was very rugged. I went to a camp that was 6,500 feet in the Sierra Nevadas. We had running water only because there was a spring that fed the camp. There was no electricity. There, I experienced a profound sense of the Holy. As an 11 year old, I was convinced that I could stay there. There was a tent platform that I could use. I would figure out how to find food. I would be there in the summer when campers were there, of course, and I was convinced that I could also be there when there were 14 feet of snow. I could dig out, and there would be plenty of water for me. As I grew, I realized that I couldn’t stay there, at least not all the time. In fact, my call was not to stay up on the mountaintop by myself, but to be with people. A sense of call to ministry came to me at that place. Again, that ministry had to be down the mountain where that call would be lived out.

As I think about where this text might touch our lives, it is in the places where, once we have had the revelation, (that holy moment, whether it be on the mountaintop, or through music, or a place of prayer, or wherever it is for you), we are called to make our way in the world. After the revelation, we are called to live our lives in a way that is worthy of the God who has called us as disciples, worthy of the one that we chase after star to find. We are called as people, as disciples, as ones also called beloved of God. We are called to make our way seeking after this one that doesn’t say, let’s build the tabernacle on the high mountain where no one will see it. We are called to travel down. Some might remember the preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr. where he says, “I’ve been to the mountaintop” yet he comes down amidst people, amidst danger, amidst poverty, amidst war, and works for justice at the call of this God that reveals divinity to us.

And so we too are called. Are you called? I’m telling you that you are, but do you believe it? I pray that you do. And I pray that as you journey through the season of Lent that you will be reminded that time compresses, and that we are called to open that suitcase, to let the clothes, (the wafting of stories,) spill all over the place. As you connect with that complex scripture, perhaps you will only put on one piece of clothing at

Rev. Michele Bagby Allan  
Sermon Shared at North Prospect Union, UCC  
Transfiguration Sunday, February 22, 2009

a time. Maybe it's the mountaintop. Maybe it's the voice saying, "You are beloved."  
Maybe it is the cloud of revelation that speaks to you right now.

The more I preach transfiguration Sundays, the more I think that this text is not a scripture that we're supposed to land on all at once, even as the preacher might try. We are called to listen and hear how it speaks to us today, and then to go out and continue in the journey of faith, of justice, the journey that only you are called to by God this day.

I was thinking I might sing for you. I'm not sure that I can do it, because singing is a vulnerable place. But as I was driving here, all I could think of was this song. It's not a transfiguration song. In fact there are only 2 or 3 transfiguration hymns in the hymnal, and we have sung 2 today. However, it is another song of compression. Some of you are probably familiar with Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*. Within it is "A Simple Song." I hope that I can sing it with the simplicity that is called for, but also with the complexity that would remind us of the ways that the stories have come together today.

Sing God a simple song. lauda, laudey

Make it up as you go along, lauda, laudey

Sing like you like to sing.

God' loves all simple things, for God is the simplest of all.

For God is the simplest of all.

I will sing the Lord a new song, to praise, to bless, to bless the Lord.

I will sing God's praises while I live, all of my days.

Blessed is the one who loves the Lord. Blessed is the one who praises God.

Lauda, lauda, laudey.

I will lift up my eyes to the hills from whence comes my help.

I will lift of my voice to the Lord, singing lauda, laudey.

For the Lord is my shade, is the shade upon my right hand.

And the sun shall not smite me by day, nor the moon by night.

Blessed is the one who loves the Lord. Lauda, lauda, laudey.

And walks in God's way.

Lauda, lauda, laudey. Lauda lauda di da di dey.

And walks in God's way.

I pray that you would hear anew this compression of time and space and divinity...that you would hear the story again...hear the song again. I believe that more than anything else, we long to be told the story of God's presence with us. We long to be sung to, even inexpertly, and to sing glory and praise to our God though our lives.

I am so glad to be with you, and I give thanks for the gift this place and the faith and the stories of scripture, for the teaching of students, for the love of God that is lived out in the ways that you are called. God bless you. I am so glad to be with you and to be the recipient of your great gifts of teaching. Amen.