

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

February 14, 2010 – TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

Exodus 34:29-35

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the LORD had given him on Mount Sinai. When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the LORD's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.

Luke 9:28-36

About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.) While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered

the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.

All of us have had moments of "WOW." Perhaps you were filled with awe and wonder as you watched the sunrise over the mountains or heard the cry of your newborn child or grandchild or watched a rose bloom opening up. Those moments of "WOW" move us beyond ourselves. At that instant, we are no longer focused on just the narrow scope of our personal issues because we see that there is something more to existence. In those "WOW" moments, our lives are changed in some way, and we are transformed. In those brief instances of "WOW," we catch a fleeting glimpse of the divine.

That is what both of the texts speak about today. The reading from Exodus moves us back to the time when God gave Israel the Ten Commandments, the second time. You remember that the first set of stone tablets, as the Biblical text terms them, were broken. That happened after Moses descended from Mt. Sinai and found the people worshipping a golden calf. Now, God had called him back to the mountaintop and gave the law again. This was a pivotal time in the history of Israel as God reaffirmed the covenant with the nation.

According to the text, as Moses descended from the top of Mt. Sinai and his encounter with God, his appearance was changed. The text says that his face was shining so brightly that all of the people were afraid to be near him. Moses had to wear a veil to cover his face so the people would be able to come close to him.

Then we get to the text from Luke's gospel. It is a strange and mystical story. Jesus, accompanied by Peter, James, and John, went to the top of a mountain. The disciples fell asleep, and, when they awoke, they saw two other figures, whom they identified as Moses and Elijah, standing with Jesus. The disciples saw that Jesus' appearance had changed. The

text said the disciples saw the glory of Jesus illuminating the scene.

Just as the story of the Ten Commandments marked a pivotal time in the life of the nation Israel, this narrative marked a pivotal point in the life of Jesus. It occurs at about the midpoint of his ministry. In many ways, it looks back at his baptism, the beginning of his ministry, with the voice from the heavens and foreshadows the events that will occur at the crucifixion. In any instance, the story showed a divine approval for the ministry of Jesus.

So, here we have this strange encounter. Two larger than life figures from Jewish history – Moses, the giver of law, and Elijah, the miracle-working prophet – consulting with Jesus about his impending death. The disciples were dazed and confused and struggled to make sense of what they saw. In the end, they were only able to be silent.

What does all of this mean for us? The season following Christmas is designated “Epiphany,” a time when the reality of God is revealed to us. Today, Transfiguration Sunday, is the last Sunday in Epiphany, just as the Baptism of Jesus was the first. If this is a time of revealing, what does the text reveal? What are we supposed to learn from this story?

At the risk of oversimplification and stating the obvious, we are supposed to learn something of God and our relationship with God.

There are those who claim that God is so far removed from us that we can never know anything about God, and, frankly, it would be easier for us all if God were indeed completely unknowable. Folks who make this claim see God as nothing other than a vague, ineffable, mysterious experience that cannot be completely grasped by humans. They believe that the most humans can say is, “Here are my attempts at some understanding of God, but I know that your understanding will be much different than mine.”

There is much to commend this approach to Congregationalists. After

all, we confess, more openly and proudly than others, that our faith experience is a journey. We seek answers for ourselves and recognize the incompleteness of our answers. We would not presume to tell someone else what her or his answers to the questions about the reality of God should be. So, this understanding of an unknowable God appeals to us.

And, in truth, none of us can completely know God. At our best, we are finite and limited. We have to operate within our boundaries. This chasm that separates us from the infinite, unlimited, and unbounded God has been recognized throughout the history of the church and described by such theologians as Augustine. So, if Augustine could adopt this view, who are we to quibble?

This awareness of how much beyond us God is leads to another position. Since God is unknowable, some say, anything I would say about God, any statement I would make or description I would propose, must be acceptable. That is the other perspective I want to address.

I hear people make these pronouncements about the nature of God, as I am certain you do. I read about one teenager who said, "I am very religious. To me, God is a force, like gravity. A force for good and love in the world." Dissect that statement with me for just a moment. It is a good thing that this teenager comprehends the good and the love produced by God. It is not so good that this young person identifies God merely as an impersonal force.

The Biblical message speaks against both of these approaches. God as completely unknowable? As Christians, we affirm that God has always revealed something of God's self to us. We may not know all there is to know about God, but we frankly know quite a lot.

As a church, we are who we are and we do what we do because we think that something of the truth about God has come to us from beyond ourselves. At Christmas, as we gather as a family around the manger, we celebrate this revelation of God to us. We discover that God has come

to dwell with us and that God has a name. This knowledge of God leads us to be involved in this church and in our work in the world.

We also affirm that God is not merely some impersonal force, like gravity, that acts on the world. I used to teach high school physics. I know that I can measure the effects of gravity. I know that objects fall at the rate of 32 feet per second. I can calculate the force of the gravitational attraction between two objects. There is much we can know about gravity, but gravity is not something personal. I cannot have a personal interaction with an impersonal force.

The Christian confession is that, in the life and teaching of Jesus the Christ, we have seen something of God. The Epiphany we celebrate, the manifestation of meaning we hold, is God's self-revelation to us. As a result of this divine self-revelation through the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ, we understand God in a relational way. We experience the love of God given to us and the care of God shown to us.

Dear people of God, that is why we gather here as a community of faith. We hear the voice from the mountain commanding those three disciples, Peter, James, and John and all of us to be silent and to listen to Jesus. We are to hear what God would say to us. On this Transfiguration Sunday, we have the opportunity to consider again the depth and breadth of God's love for us. We have the opportunity to see how God works for our wholeness and healing, our salvation. We can experience God's presence. We can stop, listen, and say, "WOW." AMEN.