

**Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Transfiguration Sunday
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am
February 19, 2023
The Rev Dr Scott Couper**

**“Mythic Geography”
Christian Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9**



Painting *Transfiguration* (2000) by Laura James

I think often I am guilty as a minister of instilling a false dichotomy in our church between that which is termed ‘devotional’ and that which is termed ‘prophetic’. For this, I beg the congregation’s forgiveness. For those of you who may be confused by my confession, you need only speak to the leadership of our church, our Council, or Lynn, it’s Chair. There is a false binary that I have perhaps encouraged that understands that there are faith lessons that foster wisdom and thus engender inner peace and those that foster contestation and thus establish justice. The peace and assurance are understood to be sourced from within and the angst and contestation are to be stirred from outside oneself. I think all in our

church, from time to time, experience this spiritual tension. Perhaps we can simply call it a tension between 'being' and 'doing'.

I am much more of a 'doing' person; I want justice. I want to be a force for change that enables the 'kingdom of God on earth just as it is in heaven'. Some of you may be 'being' people. You seek to heal your soul, to grow your spirit, so as to enable the kingdom of God to be in your heart, within you.

Centre Church is very much about 'Doing'. Our missions are action-oriented. We support and host Loaves & Fishes and the Brattleboro Centre for Children, Carry Me Home, AA and NA, as well as contribute to dozens of causes in our community and the wider church. We are a church of action that seeks to better the world.

Perhaps, we have fallen short on developing our inner spiritual resources. And this is, in part, my failing. Yet, lately our church is organically seeking to right ourselves and become better balanced – understanding that 'being' as important as 'doing'. As a church, we are now supporting prayer in the Muslim community and meditation in the Zen Buddhist community. For our own sakes, we offer Thursday devotionals, a Christian Theology class, and a Pub Theology forum. More recently we offer contemplative prayer in the chapel on Wednesdays. And beginning this week, we are even offering Yoga. All of these offerings assist us in

developing our inner spiritual resources. Long-time members like Lynn and Bonnie and new friends such as Martha, Nancy, and Jean that are demonstrating to me the need and value of a spirituality sourced from within. We are moving closer to being a church of believing, belonging, and becoming a being and doing church.

Friends, the Transfiguration story shatters the false dichotomy between 'being' and 'doing' and enables prophetic and devotional spiritualities to cease being oppositional. The Transfiguration story causes 'being' and 'doing' to be symbiotic, reciprocal, and mutual. In today's story, the mountain, Mount Tabor, enables the contestation between the two to dissolve. During the Transfiguration, Mount Tabor became the *axis mundi*, which in Latin is the "line or stem through the earth's center connecting its surface to the underworld and the heavens and around which the universe revolves". The mountain is the apex of 'mythic geography'.¹

To understand the Transfiguration Story, we must understand the experiences of Moses and Elijah and note their similarities with Jesus and then apply them all to us! In the book of Exodus, Moses encounters God three times in order to receive instructions for how to live after the oppression from the Egyptian Empire. Three epiphanies occur in which are included, first and foremost,

¹ This phrase and the inspiration for this message is from:

Ched Myers, "Transfiguration Sunday (Last Sunday after Epiphany) in *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary Year A*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 114.

a mountain - Sinai. Second, clouds. Third, a forty-day retreat. And fourth, Moses shining brightly. Listen to Exodus 34:29: "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking to God". Now listen to Matthew 17:2: And Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shown like the sun, and his garments became white as light".

Like Moses, Elijah also flees an empire, that is the Israelite Empire, when king Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, seek to kill him. Again, like Moses, we have a flight to the wilderness. And again, we have a mountain, Mount Horeb. "To stay safe, Elijah left the land of Israel. He traveled for forty days and forty nights, fasting as he went. Then he came to Mount Horeb and found a cave in which to hide. The Lord told Elijah to go to the top of the mountain so that He could speak to Elijah" (I Kings 19:3, 8-11).²

And in the story of Jesus' Transfiguration we have a mountain, Mount Tabor. Jesus had already had his forty days and nights fasting in the wilderness. We have clouds. And of course, we all heard from Roger that Jesus' face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light' in the presence of God. Whereas Moses encountered God *after* confrontation with Empire and Elijah encountered God *during* confrontation with Empire, Jesus encountered God on Mount Tabor *before*

² Some scholars debate if Mount Horeb is the same mountain as Sinai.

his confrontation with Empire. Which Empire? The Roman Empire. And if we have not gotten the point of the recurring motifs yet, Matthew's gospel has Moses and Elijah sitting right up there with Jesus as if to say, like Moses, but more than Moses, like Elijah, but more than Elijah, "Listen to Jesus!"

Friends, I am learning that there is no competition between a devotional and a prophetic ministry. There is no false choice between 'being' and 'doing'. For forty days and nights, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus went on retreat and developed their spiritual inner spiritual resources so as to empower them to carry out their ministries to the world. As we conclude the season of Epiphany with the greatest of epiphanies, the Transfiguration, we are invited for forty days to journey through a season of inner reflection: Lent. Yet, as we immerse ourselves in reflection let us recall that Moses went to the mountain wilderness after fighting a 'civilized' empire. Elijah went to the wilderness mountain after fleeing a 'civilized' empire. Jesus went to the wilderness mountain before confronting a 'civilized' empire.

The lesson of the Transfiguration is this: There is no following God without confronting power and principalities and we gain our spiritual sustenance to do this in the wilderness, in nature, on the mountain. Not in the tent; not in the temple; not in the city. In and on Creation is where we most intimately encounter God.

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