

**Visions of Jesus for Our Time (1): The Way of the Spirit  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
18 February 2007  
Text: Luke 9:28-43**

Karl Barth ranks among the most prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologians. His comprehensive, multi-volume systematic theology fills a 5-foot bookshelf. At the end of his life, Barth was interviewed by a reporter who asked him to identify the single most important truth he affirmed after all his research, study and reflection. The wise old man replied, *Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so.*

When all is said and done, this is the bedrock of Christian faith. Of course affirming that holds consequences for the way we live our lives, the choices we make, and the actions we take. But who is this Jesus, what authority does he have over us, and why do we claim that he constitutes the heart of Christianity? Here at Fairmount, we appreciate a thinking faith—one that questions, probes, explores, wonders. All of us—from your pastor and leaders to the confirmation class members---have doubts, and struggle with what it means to be Christian and to seek the way of Christ. I've had long-standing members, inquirers, and church officers express uncertainty about the single theological affirmation one is asked to make to become a member of a Presbyterian Church: to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.

These questions—and the quest for understanding—have prompted this year's Lenten sermon series. For the next 7 weeks, we will explore the biblical witness about Jesus—his earthly life and ministry and his death and resurrection---with a view toward glimpsing its meaning for our lives and faith. What kind of person was Jesus? Is he a role model for both men and women? What is the content of his preaching? In what sense does he judge us? What does it mean to call him "God's Son?" How does Jesus "save" us? How is he alive

today—and what does he expect from us? The sermon series is entitled *Visions of Jesus for Our Time* because we will look through each biblical picture of Jesus as a window on our contemporary context.

Now technically, Lent doesn't begin until Wednesday, but I wanted to start our exploration today because the gospel reading offers a stunning vision of Jesus as Divine Guide. Here Jesus is the light that literally and figuratively awakens sleepy disciples to new insight and clearer purpose. It doesn't happen all at once, and you have the feeling they didn't "get it" immediately. It's also described in supernatural terms that might make us envy biblical people who seemed to have far more direct engagement with God than we do. But don't let the details of their heavenly vision override the deeper truth: Jesus invites us all on a spiritual journey to help us see him more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly, day by day. Listen for God's Word to you in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the ninth chapter at the 28<sup>th</sup> verse (LUKE 9:28-43a)

Maybe it was all those years spent in the Motor City, but I am fascinated by American's love affair with the automobile. The lure of the open road, the thrill of speed, the freedom of mobility: these are forever linked in my mind to the car (I know, I know, so are carbon dioxide emissions and global warming; that's a topic for another day!) Say what you want about the power of marketing, but these associations work because at a basic level, life is a highway, a road continually stretching before us, taking us...who knows where. And most of us want to travel that highway as drivers, rather than passengers. We want to have some say in which route to choose and how fast to go.

Though automobile travel is a twentieth-century phenomenon, the idea of life as a journey is ancient. Our own faith tradition very much reflects this theme—the presence and saving activity of a God who leads the people out of slavery, back home from exile, on a preaching and healing mission, all the

way to a “dead-end” at the cross; and then, miraculously, mysteriously, the road re-appears, heading out of an empty tomb. The destination? The Kingdom of God...not so much heaven-and-the-afterlife, but a state of being: of personal relationship, communion with God, with others, and with one’s most authentic self....of God’s rule reflected in the wider community, a rule of justice and peace and wholeness. Life is a highway, friends....to our heart’s true home and the welcoming arms of the God to whom we all belong, body and soul, in life and in death.

Fairmount has expressed this image in our mission statement which calls us to seek “the way” of Christ. That suggests a process, a journey, an intentional choice of looking for a sacred path, a road leading to God.

One tool to assist us is a labyrinth. The labyrinth is a medieval invention consciously applying the journey motif as a means of spiritual insight and growth. Look at the labyrinth on your bulletin cover and you will see that it is literally a walk along a circuitous path into a central area and then back out along the same path. Note that it is different from a maze, which has dead-ends and puzzling options. A labyrinth is an ingenious pattern offering a single path that leads you in and leads you out. First created on the floor of the Chartres Cathedral in France in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, the labyrinth was a kind of surrogate pilgrimage for those who could not make the long and dangerous trek to the Holy Land. As its use developed, the labyrinth became a metaphor for human life as a journey into the heart of God.

Today, labyrinth walking is a spiritual practice that has been incorporated into a variety of contexts, both sacred and secular. Santa Fe, New Mexico has built a number of labyrinths in its public elementary schools as a way to encourage creativity and as a tool for stress reduction and anger management. A doctor who advocated for installing a labyrinth at the hospital where he is on staff explained how it offered visual evidence to all who entered the hospital that

they would do more than just treat the body—they were treating whole persons. Patients walking the labyrinth with their IV poles, family members, caregivers, and hospital staff have found a private space to walk, pray, release anxiety, gain strength. *[examples from an article in Horizons magazine, A Closer Walk with God, by Amy Starr Redwine, May/June 2004]* Our church will incorporate it into a “Soul Center” ministry in which a wide variety of practices, small group experiences, and Bible study will be offered for spiritual nourishment.

If you’re skeptical, that’s okay! There’s nothing magical about it—a labyrinth is a tool. It almost perfectly mirrors the three movements of our Scripture text: Jesus’ invitation to the disciples to go up into the mountains, the dazzling light of illumination at the summit, and then the descent that will take them back into the real world. One enters the labyrinth as an intentional act of spiritual seeking, a kind of “prayer walk” in which one listens for the voice of God within. It is a highway not driven by machine, but by one’s own soul. Like life, the journey does not follow a straight line. The labyrinth winds around, bringing us close to the center at times, but then suddenly moving us out to the edge. On the one hand, you can relax in the order of the labyrinth pattern. If you persevere, you will arrive at the center of illumination! And yet, there is freedom within the experience to find your particular way to walk it. Both the rational self and the creative, imaginative self are engaged, a gracious reminder that we are created with bodies and minds as well as souls. Spiritual hunger is satisfied as those parts are harmoniously integrated.

Elder Susan Bookshar will tell you about our new labyrinth ministry shortly, and will invite you to try it out today in Andersen Hall. But for the moment, imagine yourself on a labyrinth walk. Consider your life right now and ask yourself what concerns you might bring along. Perhaps you are experiencing a personal transition—the end of something, the beginning of something else, or that blurry, in-between time that is neither here nor there. Maybe you crave healing...for an inner hurt; for guilt or regret; for a situation that seems

insoluble. Maybe you long to be reconciled to someone from whom you are estranged. Maybe the life you experience day to day is lived at such breakneck speed and jam-packed with activity, that you would simply like some time to slow down, to be quiet, to see if you can sort out priorities and recall what is truly important to you. Maybe the greatest need you have today is a recovery of hope, of having dreams re-animated and a burnt-out spirit ignited. The journey to God is one toward wholeness. We can, without fear or hesitation, enter the labyrinth just as we are. We can make our way even with heavy baggage, onward to the center....where we discover that God has been seeking us all along, and invites us to let go of the burdens that weigh us down.

Suddenly...like a bolt of lightening. Or gradually....like the dawn of morning, we see light. We “get it.” At the center of the labyrinth we find illumination. Or rather, we receive it as a gift from God. A word, a vision, an insight, the peace that passes our human understanding. *This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!* Your life is not hidden from God; your concerns are not brushed aside as if they (and you) didn’t matter. In fact, this God gives power to those whose own has given out, and wings to those who were bogged down. *Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength...they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

The last part of the labyrinth walk takes us from the center of illumination back out. It is so consistently true of Christian faith that it propels the believer back out into the world. As deeply personal as the journey is, it will always, always, connect us -not only to God, but to one another. It’s not simply about having a spiritual experience, but of being nourished for service. Peter tried to preserve the moment; to hold on to it as if it were a thing to be grasped. But Jesus won’t sit still for any of that. He led them—and he leads us-- back down the mountain, to encounter a hurting world and touch it with healing.

In a labyrinth walk, it looks at first as if the path out is the same as the path in, only in reverse. But what's different is...you. The really amazing thing about the God we seek is that the relationship causes us to re-decide about our own future. We get healed, transfigured, changed...and somehow the "same old, same old" takes on a whole new look.

Is the labyrinth one of those spirituality fads that make waves for a while until the next new, new thing comes along? We Presbyterians are not fond of gimmicks and highly suspicious of anything that even whispers "new age." Certainly there are many, many other ways to seek God's guidance for the living of our complex days. But, friends, life IS a highway, and if you want to drive it, this is one good way to re-fuel and find refreshment, to take a look at the map, and then move on, back out of this safe space, into a world that needs the light of Christ more than anything else.

**TO JESUS CHRIST WHO LOVES US, WHO FREED US THROUGH HIS CROSS, AND MADE US TO BE A KINGDOM, TO HIM BE GLORY AND POWER FOREVER. AMEN.**