

**Journey to Enlightenment
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Matthew 17:1-9**

Oh great, another sermon on light....and we're still in the middle of a light-deprived Cleveland winter. In response to last Sunday's reminder that the Indians' home opener is now just 57 days away, one of you tried to be even more encouraging by noting that there are only 12 days until pitchers and catchers have to report for duty (in Florida, naturally). Last week's text invited us to "arise, shine, for your light has come." Today's might be summarized by this story from the Eastern religious tradition. The students of a teacher once asked him, "What did you get from enlightenment? Did you become divine?" "No," he replied. "Did you become holy?" "No." "Then what did you become?" To which the Teacher responded, "Awake."

In the gospel reading for today, enlightenment comes by way of the story of Jesus' transfiguration, a vision of light in which appear images of Moses and Elijah, Israel's most prominent leader and prophet. If you squirm—as I do-- at the supernatural mysticism of this story, go talk with some kids about it. Anyone conversant with the Harry Potter books knows that Minerva McGonagall, Hogwarts School's deputy Headmistress, is skilled in the magical art of transfiguration, changing the form and appearance of an object. And really, when you think about it, you and I are too. We speak of the transfiguring power of death that changes even the outward appearance of the grieving. We see how life—with its abundant joy as well as sorrow---marks us; our physical expression and bearing just as surely as our heart and soul.

The text describes a moment when Jesus specifically invites three of his disciples on a journey toward enlightenment, up a high mountain. There they see an astonishing vision that

overpowers and awes them. But when they try to grasp and preserve the dazzling spectacle, they are silenced by a voice commanding “Listen....” The journey toward understanding—whether spiritual or relational---begins in a spirit of openness and receptivity. *Listen* for God’s Word to you in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the seventeenth chapter at the first verse. [MATTHEW 17:1-9]

The baby boomers are running smack dab into the sixties, and I’m not talking about a return to the Summer of Love. 10,000 Americans turn 60 years old every day, and suddenly, the question of how the largest, healthiest, best-educated and longest-living generation in American history will spend their twenty, thirty, or more golden years becomes sharply relevant. Marc Freedman, author of “Encore: Finding Work That Matters in the Second Half of Life” and chief executive of a think tank focused on the aging society, encourages retirement-age boomers to reinvest their enormous talent and experience into critical areas of need, perhaps in the nonprofit sector [*from a column in the Washington Post, reprinted in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, 2.1.08*]. The so-called “third age” post-retirement offers new opportunities for building significance beyond a successful career.

Of course, not all of us are there yet. (Not even close!) But in every age, at every stage of our life’s journey we want to walk the best possible path, to live life fully and well. And it’s easier said than done. We are immersed in a sea of choices and competing values, and have lost sight of horizons that define and clarify those choices. We inhabit a planet threatened by the consequences of many of our choices. Wars rage on, and the world made smaller by global commerce and technology feels scarier and more resistant to control. Those boomers turning 60 comprise the first generation of Americans who doubt that our children will have a better life than they do. Our children wonder too. We all need enlightenment—a path that will guide us, inspire us, ignite hope that even the darkest night cannot extinguish.

What troubles me more is the seeming loss of traditional sources of such enlightenment: faith and a faith community. At a social gathering recently, we parents mused as to why none of our young adult children were currently active in a church, even though they'd been raised in that environment. Of course, we hope this is a consequence of the general unsettledness of their lives right now, as they complete education, find a partner, launch into a career. And I'm encouraged by the growing group of young adults in our church who have looked to this faith community for friendship and support. But the Church is no longer the default resource for seekers, young or older. The development of our church's growth process has been shaped by the recognition that people gain spiritual insight in a variety of ways, as their needs change over the course of a lifetime. The empty nester may discover a spiritual hunger previously unnoticed when the priority was getting the kids through confirmation. Sometimes a life change will make us newly aware of our vulnerability and need for spiritual resources beyond what we possess. Sometimes what we need more than anything is to have our vision enlarged—simply to be awake instead of asleep; open rather than certain.

So let's travel up Transfiguration Mountain to see what its clear, dramatic revelation of Jesus' identity might offer for the changes and challenges of our lives.

Our text suggests the journey is intentional, rather than accidental. Surprises await the disciples, but if they had not accepted Jesus' invitation to accompany him, they would have missed it all together. Jesus led the disciples away from their routine, the busy-ness of daily life, in order to see with fresh eyes. Then notice how quickly Peter moves to incorporate the astonishing vision into familiar norms, into what he knows. His proposal is interrupted and silenced by a presence and voice that cannot be ignored. Just listen already! Finally, when the bright vision fades, Jesus is still with them, leading them off the mountain, to return to the world they know, with its heady joys and heartaches.

The journey to enlightenment includes both discipline and serendipity. For us, I believe the discipline means making choices in our packed schedules for regular time to stop, breathe deeply, and become aware of God's presence and voice. Worship, Bible study, prayer can be important tools for discerning God's presence and activity in the world. Now it's true, not every worship experience, small group discussion, or Bible study class hold transfigured moments. But isn't it interesting how those who incorporate such practices into their routine seem more able to perceive them even in the middle of ordinary days?

And how much would we benefit from listening rather than speaking??! From waiting for the Lord instead of pushing our agendas? 20th century theologian Paul Tillich noted that the first duty of love is to listen. It's about the quality of relationship. If we do all the talking, what does that say about our view of the other? To listen is to acknowledge that we are not gods, we don't know it all, we can receive; in fact, we need light beyond our own.

Which is a good thing, because the journey to enlightenment does not end on the mountain summit. That's not where we live. The stuff of real life is lived all along the mountain side, and even down into the valley, including the valley of the shadow of death. It will take every bit of light each of us possesses to see God's hand at work in the chaotic, complex and deadly world we inhabit daily.

And this friends, is how we find enlightenment. I have no parallel experience to the biblical story of transfiguration in my own life. I've never had one bright defining moment when everything became clear, and I knew, *knew absolutely*, the truth. I've come to believe that "certainty" is not the purpose of enlightenment. We know only too well how dangerous and destructive religious certainty is. Enlightenment grows as we join with others to shine the light we have on the broken, painful, unjust, places below the summit. We don't have all

the answers. Like the disciples, even after their mountaintop experience, we will struggle on a way clouded with doubts and questions. Jesus invites us to follow him. We don't have to know anything, except that he is with us. We do not walk alone. But we do have to walk. The Spanish poet Antonia Machado puts it another way: *Traveler, there are no paths. Paths are made by walking.*

One of you reminded me of an inspiring example of a path-maker profiled recently in the *Plain Dealer*. Donshon Wilson directs the Shaw High School's marching band, which has been chosen as one of only five high school bands in the nation invited to perform at the Olympics this summer in Beijing. A graduate of the East Cleveland school, Wilson was horrified to learn a decade ago that the band had, well, disbanded. He started volunteering with some drummers, and little by little, instrument by instrument, he rebuilt the band, which he now directs full time. Marching band isn't really about marching band, he says. "It's about learning how to live meaningful lives." [*Cleveland Plain Dealer, 1.25.08*] Sounds like enlightenment to me. We have the opportunity to contribute to the process, as the band is working to raise the additional money to fund what will undoubtedly be for them a transforming experience.

Friends, this is good news for a change. And that in a nutshell is the path to which Jesus calls us. Good news that will change us, that will change the world, by strengthening us to reflect the light of life in this place and time. That's why we gather at this table, again and again and again. To receive Christ, to know communion with God and one another as the light by which we are awakened every day.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

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