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New Sight  
Martin Grove United Church  
February 7, 2016  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Exodus 34:29-35 and Luke 9:28-43

In the summer of 2010, my family and I took a car camping trip to the Canadian Prairies. In 25 days on the road - sleeping in tents and visiting friends and family - we made it as far west as Jasper, Alberta. I will admit that I loved almost all of the scenery, particularly the prairies, but I can't deny that there is something special about mountains. Mountains defy the prevailing weather, and create their own local weather systems. Mountains create their own clouds. Mountains are mysterious, particularly to a prairie person like myself. And, for those people with the strength to climb - or the good fortune to find an alternative - mountains provide a new view - a new perspective on life - that is different from the perspective we experience from below.

My family and I experienced the wonder of the Jasper Tramway, on the clearest day I could imagine, and were rewarded with unforgettable views and perspectives. It truly felt like a different world being at the top of Whistlers Mountain, overlooking Jasper. A fact that was re-enforced when we decided it was time to come down.

I thought of those mountains again this week because our two lectionary readings both involve making a mountain trip and finding a new perspective. In Exodus, Moses returns from his time in the mountains with a new vision of community. And in Luke, Jesus and some of his friends climb a mountain to get away from the crowd. And in both stories, the change of location contributes to a new perspective - and to a spiritual encounter. In both stories, getting away from normal living allowed other perspectives to percolate to the surface.

In Protestant tradition, this week we celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus. That's the name we give to the story from Luke where the disciples climbed a mountain with Jesus and saw Jesus transformed. This week also marks the end of Epiphany. That's important not only because next Sunday will be the first Sunday in Lent, but because

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Tuesday is Shrove Tuesday - which means Pancake Supper. But before the pancakes are served, we need to consider the story of the transfiguration.

In the story, the appearance of Jesus changes, and Peter offers to build dwellings to commemorate the event. What do you think Peter saw that made him think of that? Perhaps we are cynical because we have heard so many stories and sermons about mountain-top experiences - I mean - we all know that mountain-top experiences are great, but that we don't live on mountain-tops. Blah blah blah. And yet, mountain-top experiences are special. We get a clearer vision of what's going on. We get an unobstructed view of reality. But we know we don't live there. I wonder why Peter wanted to build those structures. Perhaps Peter wanted to live on the mountain-top himself. Perhaps Peter imagined that Jesus wanted to live in a shrine, away from the crowds, pure and uncontaminated by normal life.

Predictably, Jesus does not support Peter's idea. Jesus did not live in a shrine, and he wasn't about to start living in a shrine after Peter suggested it. In fact, immediately following the transfiguration story Jesus is back to his most frequent occupation - he is back with the common people, and Jesus is busy healing someone.

But I feel for Peter. I really do. So many times in my own life I've wanted to "freeze" an experience. I've wanted to preserve and immortalize a slice of my own life. I've wanted to make a "backup copy" of something so that I can relive the experience of it again and again. I've truly enjoyed every stage of family development as my children have grown up. I loved having babies. I loved having children. I even loved having teenagers. And I am living into having young adult children now. Each new stage has been wonderful. But at the same time, I have felt the desire to "freeze" time. To preserve a stage of life that I truly enjoyed. It's very natural to want to preserve what we love. Even when the future looks bright, it can be hard to let go of the past.

It's a very tempting idea in our churches too. Many United Church of Canada congregations seem to want to freeze and preserve an image of who they are today - or sometimes an image of who they were in their past. We want to hang on to a piece of our own congregational life where we knew we had value to our community, where we were

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respected, where we were understood, where we were part of the mainstream, where we even defined the mainstream.

[demonstration - typewriter vs laptop]

[noun vs verb]

Churches today can decide. Is “church” a noun - something to be kept and preserved. Or is “church” a verb - an action - a potential to do something - an ability to reach out - a ministry - a mission - a growing relationship?

I suppose ultimately it just depends on what we are called to do - and who we are called to be. Perhaps we - like Peter - are called not to immortalize our past but to leave the mountain and embrace our unknown and perhaps scary future. Perhaps we are called to follow Jesus back down the mountain into a future that we can not predict and certainly cannot control. That sounds scary. That would take courage. That would take strength. That would take faith. That would take new perspective. That would take new vision.

Whenever I hear the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, I always wonder - what actually happened on that mountain. What would we have seen if we had been there ourselves? One interpretation is that Jesus looked different to the disciples because Jesus changed. The story is certainly written that way. Luke says, “the appearance of Jesus’s face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white” The story as written certainly suggests that Jesus changed, or at least his appearance changed.

But perhaps Jesus looked different to the disciples because the disciples were themselves changed. Perhaps it was the disciples’ ability to see that changed. Did Jesus’s body physically change, or was it simply that John, James, and Peter could now see the face of God shining through the man that they thought they already knew well? Who was changed that day? Jesus? Or the disciples?

And if the disciples vision changed on that day, did their new ability to see come down from the mountain with them when they finally descended? When they left the

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mountain to return to everyday life, did the disciples take their new capacity to see into the valleys of their world? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in Jesus when they were not on the mountain? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in other people? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in each other. Did the disciples receive new sight?

*[demonstration - bulletin cover]*

And what would be the bigger miracle? Jesus's body physically changing? Or the disciples - who were ordinary people like us - finding new sight and being able to see the face of God in the everyday world?

We have a choice. We always have a choice. Like the disciples, we can choose to immortalize some very important part of our life. To try to maintain that image. To try to preserve that image. Or, we can take the risk to look with new eyes, we can set our sight forwards, to an unknown future, we can take a chance on seeing the face of God in our own world. We can take a chance on seeing the face of God in our own community. We can take a chance on seeing the face of God in each other.

Receive new sight.

*Amen*