
New Sight
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
February 27, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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

[image; jasper alberta]

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 cannot 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 we 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 new perspectives - and to spiritual encounters. In both stories, getting away from normal living allowed other perspectives to percolate to the surface.

[image: mount hood]

In Protestant tradition, this week we celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus. That's the name we give to the story from Matthew, Mark, and Luke where the disciples climbed a mountain and saw Jesus transformed. 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 want to do 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 do not 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.

[image: I haven't lost my mind - it's backed up on tape]

But I feel for Peter. I really do. So many times in my own life I wanted to "freeze" an experience. I wanted to preserve and immortalize a slice of my own life. I wanted to make a "backup copy" of something so that I can relive the experience of it again and again. I have 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 now living into having young adult children. 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.

[image: spire]

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 perhaps more truthfully 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 respected. Where we were understood. Where we were part of the mainstream. Where we even defined the mainstream. Perhaps we long for something from our past, like a favourite minister, or a time when our children came to worship with us. The desire to freeze a special moment in time - to preserve it - is very natural.

Perhaps it was the same thing with Peter. He wanted to immortalize the mountain top event. But of course, Jesus does not support Peter's idea. 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.

[image: bicycle going down hill]

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 cannot 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 sight.

[image: transfiguration]

And speaking of new sight, what does “transfigure” actually mean? “Trans” means change. And “figure” refers to either the nature, or the appearance, of something. So, “transfigure” means a change in the nature - or the appearance - of something. The gospel story is therefore either about the disciples seeing Jesus’s appearance change. Or the disciples seeing Jesus actually change. Or it is about how the disciples changed how they saw Jesus. In any case, something changed.

[image: change tire]

So now I’ve said it - the “C” word - “change”. Yuck. I mean, who ever wants to talk about change in church. And yet, change is all around us. Even in our Exodus reading we see change. Remember that in the Exodus myth, Moses goes up a mountain and comes back with stone tablets containing the 10 commandments. But when he returns, the people Moses left behind are having a party. And so in anger, Moses smashes the tablets because the people broke a commandment they had not been told about yet. So later on in the story, Moses goes back up the mountain to get new tablets to replace the ones that he smashed. That’s the text we read earlier. These replacement tablets are unlike any commandments you have ever heard. Instead of sensible commandments to not kill or steal, we have very strange commandments. Including a prohibition on boiling a kid in its mother’s milk. It’s too bad that the authors of the lectionary cut out the commandments themselves, because they are real head-scratchers. Read them yourself in Exodus 34 sometime. But my point is that even the “10 commandments” as written in the Bible changed over time.

[image: change]

Change is the only thing that is permanent in life. Have you ever noticed that? Sometime during my lifetime - I'm not exactly sure when - nobody asked my permission - toilet paper became bathroom tissue. Sneakers became running shoes. False teeth became dental appliances. The dump became the landfill. Used cars became previously-owned transportation. And as we are reminded of regularly, governments no longer lie to people, they engage in dis-information. Change is all around us.

The traditional interpretation of the transfiguration is that Jesus changed during his mountain-top experience. The "proof" for that is that the lectionary authors paired the gospel reading today with the reading from Exodus where Moses visibly changed after meeting God. But it's still a little hard to figure out exactly what changed. In the gospel story, God - referring to Jesus - says, "This is my son - listen to him", which is almost exactly what God's said 3 years earlier at Jesus's baptism. The story of the transfiguration of Jesus - when we actually read it - does not describe change it all, it really just lays out the status quo. So where is the change? What is the point of the story if Jesus did not change? Remind me - why do we care about this transfiguration business?

Besides, don't we always say that looks can be deceiving?

[image: mr bean vs rowan atkinson]

In Luke's version of the transfiguration, it says that the disciples saw the appearance of Jesus's face change, and Jesus's clothes appeared to be very white. So perhaps that's all there is to the story. To imagine that the appearance of Jesus changed. But his mission remained what it had always been. Is it just me, or does that sound just a bit ... pointless ... I mean, if that's all that happened, why would anyone get excited about Transfiguration Sunday?

Can we even imagine that the appearance of Jesus changed while his mission remained the same. Have you ever seen such a thing yourself. Well, I think it's actually a pretty good description of the church today. It describes what is happening in many churches, including Sydenham-Heritage United Church.

In many ways, our appearance has changed. And that process started long before covid. Today, you have a minister who is allergic to wearing a tie and touching paper. We

have strange activities at church, like drum circles. We even sing music written less than 50 years ago! We have people who sometimes come to church in blue jeans and bring coffee with them into the sanctuary. None of those things would have been acceptable at one time. And of course with covid, we see other changes. The obvious one for me is that I can't see all of you today! This year for Ash Wednesday we will be completely surrounded by no ashes. Our appearance has changed. But does it matter that our appearance has changed? What matters is what we are called to do.

When the pandemic first hit, I asked for the church sign to read "the church building is closed". I don't know whether the people doing the sign didn't have the right letters, but what they put up was "the church is closed". But this church has never been closed. Our appearance has changed. But we were still open for business. But I do understand that some people confuse "church" with "church building"

[image: sanctuary - rock church, Helsinki]

And I want to apologize right now for my part in that. Because I have failed to teach you something. And I want to fix that right now. What does the word "sanctuary" mean? I will assume most of you think it refers to the space we are now sitting in. Well sorry, but the meaning of the word sanctuary is something else that has changed. And yes you are out of date, because it changed about 2000 years ago.

In the Old Testament, "sanctuary" referred to a place where God supposedly lived. Reading from Hebrews 9, "Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. For a tent was constructed, the first one, in which were the lamp-stand, the table, and the bread of the Presence; this is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a tent called the Holy of Holies." (Hebrews 9:1-4). The holy of holies was where God was thought to live. And the curtain separated the holy of holies from the rest of the sanctuary. But when that trouble-maker - Jesus - came along, he changed that. You may remember that when Jesus was crucified, at the moment he died the curtain in the temple split open. That signified that there is no separation between God and humans. We are no longer separated from God - ever. Christians do not believe that God lives in a building - hiding behind a curtain like the Wizard of Oz. God lives within the body of Christ. And the body of Christ is - us. So we - the congregation -

are the sanctuary. In Old Testament terms anyway. We are the flesh and bones, energy, the hopes, the fears, the dreams, and the passions of Jesus. We are the sanctuary.

[image: god does not want you to go to church]

Not only is this room not a sanctuary, but the whole building is not a church either. The building we are sitting in is not a church. This building is just is a building we use to help us become a church. This is just a building we use so that we ourselves can be a church. I invite us to keep that in mind when God sends people through our front door.

[image: going to church does not make you a christian]

But again, why should it bother us if our appearance changes, as long as our commitment to our mission remains? Do we care about our appearance? Or do we only care that we live, breath, and act as a church in our community. Like with the transfiguration of Jesus, who cares about our appearance as long as we maintain our mission to this community. What's that old joke? Going to church doesn't make you a christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile.

Right now - especially after 2 years of the pandemic, this congregation is struggling somewhat to re-affirm our own mission. We are a work in progress. And that's ok. We are not called to be perfect. We are only called to be the church in our own time and place.

[image: eye on brantford]

The disciples changed their view of Jesus. The disciples found new sight. Can we do the same thing here? Can we change our view of ourselves. And by doing so can we find new ways to see our own community? How do we see Brantford? And how does Brantford see us?

We are the flesh and bones, energy, the hopes, the fears, the passions, of Jesus. We are Sydenham-Heritage United Church. Thanks be to God.

Amen.