
Embracing Change
Chapel in the Park United Church
February 15, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mathew 17:1-21

[image: earth around sun]

Time really flies. I cannot believe we have just heard the story of the transfiguration of Jesus - again. I guess another year has passed us by. On the plus side, that means we get pancakes next Wednesday @ 5:30 @ A&W before our Ash Wednesday service @ 7 pm.

And please forgive me. This week Mary Ellen and I were pulling together the Annual Report, so my mind has in some ways drifted forwards to the Annual Meeting we will hold together on March 1. And I mention this because the story of the transfiguration of Jesus always reminds me of congregational meetings. In fact, this sermon might fit better on March 1. But you have all been given the Annual Report so now is a good time to start thinking about that meeting anyway. So what is the connection between the story of the transfiguration of Jesus and congregational meetings? Good question.

Here is one possible connection. When Jesus was up the mountain the rest of the disciples were probably sleeping - and perhaps you anticipate sleeping through our congregational meeting. But I'm actually thinking of something else. There is a much deeper connection between the story of the transfiguration and congregational meetings. And it just now occurred to me that you and I might actually be thinking of different versions of the transfiguration story.

What other versions of the transfiguration story are there? That is not a trick question. I'm not trying to test your biblical knowledge. There are 4 versions of the story of the transfiguration of Jesus in the Bible. The story is found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and there is a reference to the event in the Second Epistle of Peter. So there are 4 written versions of the story in the New Testament. But basically those all match each other pretty well. They are the same story with slightly different words and

emphases. So what other transfiguration story is Rev Paul talking about? What other transfiguration stories do you know? That is also not a trick question.

[image: butterfly emerging]

I want to lead into that by telling the story of the transfiguration in my own words. And since you know me, you know that when I read the Bible I choose to read using a lens that leads to healing, hope, and new life. Because that is how I understand the term “Good News”. And the word “Gospel” means “good news”.

So here goes. Jesus dealt with a lot of people. But he had a small group of friends we call “the disciples”. And within that small group Jesus had a few really close friends - his besties. One day, Jesus had finished teaching to a large group and wanted to spend some time away from the crowds. Jesus often did this. Sometimes, Jesus went into quiet space alone. Sometimes he went with all of the disciples. And sometimes he went with just his besties. On this occasion, Jesus went away with his besties up a hillside. Jesus wanted to find some peace. To meditate and reflect on life. Or maybe Jesus just wanted to chill. That was common. Jesus lived an authentic life, and making time for reflection and inner peace was important to him. Jesus made time for self-care.

When Jesus and his besties went up the hillside, Jesus did indeed find inner peace. He found himself. He had that face that I often see on people who are part of our drum circle. Jesus felt connected. He felt loved. He was at peace. He was fully in the present moment. Jesus began to glow. If you have never seen a person glow, come to our drum circle. Anyway, Jesus’s besties noticed that glow. And the besties expressed that glow in the language of their own culture, so they used a reference to the mythical story of Moses on the mountain. But that was only in their imagination. The glow itself - however - was real.

Jesus’s besties also felt this glow. They felt it’s presence. They felt connected. But likely in a different way than how Jesus felt if. We all respond differently to the glow. The bestie’s response to this glow was to try to immortalize the experience. To preserve it. To bottle it. To lay it down on tape because solid state drives had not yet been invented.

And the besties suggested that to Jesus. They suggested to Jesus that Jesus should himself want to live in that place and live in that glow. On that hillside. Away from all the

people. Away from the cares and chaos of the world. The besties preferred the glow, on the hillside, to the messiness of dealing with real people and their ordinary lives. And we can perhaps all sympathize with that feeling.

And how did Jesus respond to the suggestion that he could stay isolated and live his life in the glow? Jesus did not respond verbally to this recommendation. Jesus did not verbally disagree with his besties. Jesus did not belittle his besties for having the idea. No. Jesus's response was simply to head back down from the hillside to where the rest of the disciples were waiting. And because the disciples had remained together, there was a crowd of people already there, waiting for Jesus.

And the very first thing that Jesus did when he returned was to help a person find healing. Turns out that the disciples had tried to help the person themselves, but they had not succeeded. And Jesus loved his disciples so much that he spoke truth to them. The truth was that they lacked the faith that they could make a difference in another person's life.

That is the end of my version of the transfiguration story.

I have told that story many times to many different people in many different contexts. To me - today - the story of the transfiguration parallels the story of Chapel in the Park United Church. And more generally the story of the United Church of Canada. And even more generally the story of mainline Protestant churches in Canada.

The parallel for me is found in the tensions within the story. The disciples want to immortalize a perfect moment from their past. Jesus only cares about healing, and relationships.

To me, this matches the tension found in our churches today. That tension can be unveiled in different ways. One way is by simply asking, "why are we - as a church - here at all?"

Here are some possible answers. And I would love to hear your own answer later:

- Are we just immortalizing something from our past? Perhaps a time when we as a church had real social clout?
- Are we just immortalizing something from our past? Perhaps a time when we worshipped together with our children?

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- Are we here just out of habit?
 - Are we here because our mothers made us go to church?
 - Are we here because this is the only place where we feel we have some control over our lives.
 - Are we here because for 1 hour every week we can pretend that we still live in the past?

Or:

- Are we here because we have the faith that we can make a difference in another person's life.
- Are we here because we believe we can help other people find healing?
- Are we here because our community needs us?
- Are we here because we believe we can find our own healing here?

Another way to unveil this tension is to ask who it is that we are becoming? Think back 1 year and compare. Have we changed in the past year? And I mean that for us as individuals, and for us as a congregation. In what ways have we changed? Who have we become in the past year? There is a great song by the band Styx called "Man in the wilderness" that asks,

[image: another year has passed me by]

"Another year has passed me by. Still, I look at myself and cry - "What kind of man have I become?" We need to ask ourselves, what kind of person have we become? And, what kind of person do we want to be. We can also ask, what kind of church have we become? And what kind of church do we want to be?

Another way to unveil this tension is to see the church as a ship. As William Shedd famously said,

[image: a ship in harbour is safe]

"A ship in harbour is safe, but that is not what ships are build for." It's a good analogy for the church today. Again, not just Chapel in the Park United Church, but most mainline Protestant churches in Canada. You can keep a ship in harbour and keep it maintained. The hull will be clean. The decks will be spotless. The sails will be perfect. It

will be the perfect ship. Except for the little detail that a ship that stays in a harbour does not live into it's identity of actually being a ship.

Or we can take the ship out to sea. While we are at sea any repairs needed are either difficult or impossible. The hull will become contaminated. The decks will become greasy. The sails will rip in strong winds. But the ship at sea is living out it's identity of being a ship.

Do we want to be a church where we are "perfect" because we never venture out and try new things? Or do we want to engage in our own community - and have honest relationships with each other - even if that exposes us to the messiness of our world. And - God forbid - the messiness of our own lives?

We need to ask ourselves, what kind of church have we become? And "what kind of church do we want to be?" That is something we can all think about in preparation for our Annual Meeting in 2 weeks.

I don't want to leave the story right there though. Because we've discussed quite thoroughly Jesus's part in the transfiguration story. But what about the disciples?

Because the actions of the disciples were ... I think pretty typical. They acted like we probably would have acted if we've been there ourselves. Their behaviour was so common it was actually one of the principle themes in the first Star Wars movie from 1977.

Luke travels to Dagobah to meet a Jedi master, Yoda. And Yoda teaches Luke to do many things, including levitating objects. After Luke successfully learns to levitate small rocks, Yoda challenges Luke to levitate his spacecraft. Luke attempts it, but with defeat fully planted in his mind before he even started to try. And he fails. Luke tells Yoda that levitating a rock and a spacecraft are completely different things. Yoda say - no different. Only different in your mind. Then Yoda levitates the spacecraft himself and deposits it neatly on the shore of the pond where the spacecraft had been buried for some time.

[image: Luke: "I can't believe it". Yoda: "That is why you failed"]

When Luke sees his spacecraft safely on the shore Luke says, "I can't believe it." And Yoda says to Luke, "That is why you failed"

Luke failed because he could not believe that what he was attempting was even possible. Exactly like the disciples who failed to heal a person because they could not believe that it was possible. The idea that we cannot succeed is very strong. But we - collectively - can do meaningful things. Together.

[image: butterfly emerging]

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus in many ways parallels the story of this congregation. With the very real difference that we do not know how the story of this congregation is going to end. We get to decide that for ourselves.

And I want to be clear about one thing. Sometimes when ministers talk about change, people react negatively. I get it. Change often sounds like we have to work harder or we have to do new things.

But change can also mean doing less. Doing less of things from our past that do not make sense any more. And doing more of things that bring us life and joy.

I opened by saying that there are different versions of the transfiguration story. The most important version of the transfiguration story - for me personally - today - is the story of this congregation.

We need to ask ourselves, what kind of church have we become? And “what kind of church do we want to be?”

Amen.