

Can't find God?

Rick Lorentz
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

Transfiguration Sunday
February 7, 2016

2 Corinthians 3:12 – 4:2
Luke 9:28 – 36
Matthew 17:1 – 13

Text: But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside – 2 Corinthians 3:14

Tradition has it that today's Bible passages occur just ahead of Lent. We have all gotten used to that. We've all gotten used to the word transfiguration and we all know it as a "church word." That's a saying we all picked up from Karen Wagner when she was here with us – "church word." Miss you Karen!

The transfiguration story occurs in three of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke, but not in the Gospel of John, although some would say it does in a mystical kind of way. Some scholars say that the book of John, Chapter 1, verse 14, alludes to the transfiguration when it says, "and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." The glory of a father's only son – I like the parent analogy because most parents know what I mean when I say you can see the face of God in your newborn child. If anything is full of grace and truth, a newborn baby certainly is.

The Luke passage that we read this morning is from this year's revised common lectionary for Transfiguration Sunday, but the Matthew passage is from the 2017 revised common lectionary for Transfiguration Sunday. Yup, one year ahead. I chose to have both of them read this morning because I was hoping you noticed something. I was hoping that you noticed that they are not quite the same.

At first glance, Luke's version seems quite abbreviated when compared to the Matthew passage (or the Mark version for that matter – if we had read that). It's almost as if Luke somehow zoned out during the portion of the transfiguration story when Jesus had an interchange with the disciples walking down the mountain. In Matthew, Jesus tells the disciples to be silent. In Luke the disciples kept silent, but we don't know why. In Matthew, Jesus explains the significance of Elijah and the relationship to John the Baptist. In Luke there is no such explanation – just mystery.

I know there is more to these differences than just what I say here this morning. But that's the beauty and that's the complexity of the Bible. The Gospels, the "good news" if you will, were all written several decades after Jesus was crucified and became the risen Christ.

Mark, Matthew and Luke were written at a particularly difficult time for the Jewish world. It was a time of much bad news; much suffering and death occurred at the hands of the Roman Empire. Jerusalem and the Temple faced utter destruction around the year 70. The good news of Mark was written about the time of the fall of Jerusalem and the Temple. Many date the good news of Matthew and Luke to just a few years after this, and John's good news to perhaps a couple of decades beyond that. The Gospels were the good news that the people were starved to hear.

I know that the Gospels were written by some divinely inspired human beings. They were trying to capture in written word the lessons and inspiration of Jesus, and Jesus the risen Christ. I am happy that they left discoveries to be found. If only we can be faithful to bring the meanings to this generation of human beings.

The point of my sermon this morning is not to highlight how our Bible is put together, but to highlight the point that the glory of God and Jesus the Christ can be found in unexpected places – if we only lower the veil – if we only take on a new mindfulness.

I caution you, however, to avoid a misinterpretation of one of this morning's lessons, the lesson from Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians where Paul says "Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside." After listening to what Paul said, it is easy to go down an undesired path – a path where the old covenant lessons of Moses (and possibly the Jewish faith) are pitted against the new covenant lessons of Jesus Christ. After all in this second Corinthians verse, Paul appears to place his ministry, the ministry of Jesus Christ, above that of Moses. Now that is not a point I want to make with you this morning. I think there is a richness in you grasping the lessons from both, both the "old" and the "new," for the Lord, our God, can be found in both.

So, how do we lower the veil? I propose to you that it is harder today than it has ever been. The distractions are ever greater. And the distractions are largely of our own making.

One of our biggest obstacles to lowering the veil is our own thinking mind. Most of you are familiar with the following example of how the thinking mind takes over. It is a common experience to drive someplace and have little or no awareness of what you saw along the way. You may have been on autopilot for much of the drive, not really fully there but there enough, one would hope, to drive safely and uneventfully.

Even if we deliberately try to concentrate on a particular task, whether it's driving or something else, you might find it difficult to be in the present for very long. Our attention is easily distracted. The human mind tends to wander.

Our thoughts are overpowering, particularly in times of crisis or emotional trauma. Thoughts easily cloud our awareness to the present. We can expend much energy in anticipating, planning, worrying and fantasizing about the future and what you want to happen or don't want to happen. Because of this inner busyness, which is going on almost all the time, we are liable either to miss a lot of the texture of our life experience or discount its value and meaning.

Let me bring up another example – looking at a sunset. Let's say you are not too preoccupied to look at a sunset, and are struck by the play of light and color among the clouds in the sky. For that moment, you are just there with it, taking it in, really seeing it. Then thinking comes in and perhaps you find yourself saying something to a companion, either about the sunset and how beautiful it is – or about something else that it reminded you of. You have now been captured by your own thought. So now you are really enjoying the sunset in your head rather than the sunset that is actually happening. You may be thinking you are enjoying the sunset itself, but actually you are only experiencing it through the veil of your embellishments with past sunsets and other memories and ideas that this one triggered in you.

All of this may happen completely below the level of your conscious awareness. Much of the time you may get away with being only partially conscious like this. At least it seems that way. But what you are missing is more important than you realize. If you are only partially conscious over a period of years, if you habitually run through your moments without being fully in them, you may miss some of the most precious experiences in your life, such as connecting with the people you love, or with sunsets or the crisp morning air.

The value of cultivating mindfulness, being in the moment, is not just a matter of getting more out of sunsets. When unawareness – unawareness! – dominates the mind, all our decisions and actions are affected by it. Unawareness can cause us to miss much of what is beautiful and meaningful in our lives – and as a consequence, be significantly less happy than we might otherwise be.

So let's bring this morning's message out of the bowl of psychiatry and back to this morning's lessons. We are again embarking on another stroll through Lent. We'll hear all the familiar stories; we'll go through all the familiar rituals. It would be very easy to revel in the history of our lives. Don't let history rule the present. When you find yourself doing so, I ask that you find a way to bring yourself back to the moment of the present experience. Focus on your senses – sight, sound, touch, taste, smell. Look for something new. Look for something different.

Remember this, God may give certain members of the faithful (not all of the faithful, all the time), special experiences of grace that strengthen their faith. We should welcome these experiences for the graces they are, but we should not expect them to continue indefinitely, nor should we be afraid or resentful when they cease. They may have been meant only as momentary glimpses of the joy of heaven to sustain us, to help strengthen us, as we face the challenges of this life.

So get yourself an unobstructed view. And enjoy the ride. God may have a message waiting for you. Amen.