

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
March 3, 2019
Title: The Astounded Crowd
Scripture: Exodus 34:29-35
Luke 6:27-38

The letter I sent you this week about General Conference contained the sentence, “This is one of those times, when I wish that God had used neon signs to make it very clear to everyone present what the Way Forward was, but that didn’t happen.” Today’s scripture is about times when God did use the equivalent of “neon signs” to make a statement and get the attention of the observers.

Moses went up Mount Sinai where he encountered God and received the tablets containing the Law, the Ten Commandments. The reading from Exodus tells us that the skin on his face shone because he had been talking with God. When people saw him, they were afraid to come near him because his face shone. When he was talking with the people, he would put a veil over his face so as not to frighten them.

By the way, when the Hebrew was translated into Latin by St. Jerome, Moses is described as having grown horns on his head, rather than “rays of light”. Michelangelo’s statue of Moses, as well as the work of other artists, show Moses with horns growing out of the top of his head. It seems that even when God uses “neon lights” to get our attention, it can be misunderstood.

Fast forward to today’s Gospel reading. Today is “Transfiguration Sunday”. It is the transitional Sunday between the season of Epiphany – or season of light – following Christmas, and Lent – a season of self-examination, reflection, and repentance.

In Luke's gospel, these events take place about 8 days after Jesus had told his disciples that he would be rejected, killed and be raised on the third day. Here he has done what Jesus does often. He has gone away from the crowd to pray.

He embodies what many of us seem to forget. Jesus shows us the importance of setting time apart in prayer before he comes back to see all the people.¹ Linda Furtado writing about this in the General Board of Discipleship worship material, says that in this we are reminded to trust in the essential directions that we have been provided, "to pray, to listen, and to care for the holistic needs of people."

In this case, Jesus took Peter, John and James with him – sort of his executive committee, if you will. "As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes flashed white like lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, were talking with him. They were clothed with heavenly splendor and spoke about Jesus' departure, which he would achieve in Jerusalem."

Peter, John and James, didn't know it then, but Jesus' departure was not really about the imprisonment and execution of one man – as it would seem on the Friday when Jesus was killed. It was more about the liberation and redemption of humanity. Moses led his people out of slavery in Egypt through 40 years in the wilderness until they were ready to enter the promised land. Elijah was one of many prophets who helped sustain the people in their long years. Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets and Jesus meeting with them was the fulfillment of both the law and the prophets.

Even before his death, his disciples see a sort of resurrection appearance here. They see Jesus shining with the glory of God, infinitely

alive, and ready to move forward. This appearance is meant to reassure the disciples that despite Jesus' upcoming death, he will ultimately defeat death and will return in glory.

Peter wanting to be hospitable, wanting to prolong the time on the mountain, wants to make dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah so that they can stay on the mountain. Peter and the other disciples are veiling their hearts to Jesus' upcoming suffering and death. They are veiled, they still don't understand what commitment to Jesus really means, that Jesus will suffer and die before he can rise again.

I love the Bible, and I particularly celebrate it as the Living Word of God. I do believe that there are limitations in how we use the scripture to guide our lives and we should be especially careful of proof-texting – taking a passage out of context to support a particular point of view. However, I am also frequently amazed at how passages of scripture – particularly passages in the three-year lectionary – seem to speak in a living way to circumstances that are occurring.

Following 9-11, our Bible Study group was amazed at how passages from Jeremiah seemed to speak to our needs at that time. Passages that we had not really even noticed three years earlier were vital passages to us right then.

A few weeks before General Conference, Bishop Devadhar pointed out that the scripture passages that coincided with this time period were ones about loving our enemies and not judging others. He believed that these passages spoke to what would be happening at General Conference. Today, the Sunday after General Conference, is the Transfiguration – a passage that focuses on God's glory and is a foreshadowing of resurrection.

Many of us watched the General Conference session and felt that our beloved denomination had died with some of the actions. We watched, what we believed to be God's love, being replaced with restrictions, punitive actions, and exclusion. Very soon afterwards, we were also talking about resurrection. My letter to you, claimed the promise that Good Friday – a day of death and devastation – was followed by Easter – a day of resurrection and hope.

Some of us are now also talking about resurrection for the denomination. As I noted, 1 John 3:2 (CEV) says, "My dear friends, we are already God's children, though what we will be hasn't yet been seen." This passage speaks about what we will be like when Christ returns, but I believe it can also be a word of hope to us right now.

Whether we are thinking about General Conference, or any of the many things that cause our lives to feel as if the worst has happened, there is the hope and promise of resurrection, foreshadowed here in the Transfiguration. When a loved one dies, we know that even in our sorrow, there is resurrection. When the doctor uses the words that scare you, transfiguration shows us that God is present even in the midst of the most horrible thing we can imagine. When a marriage ends, when employment is terminated, when whatever we dread happens, God is present with us and offers us the foreshadowing hope of resurrection.

Peter, John and James, didn't really understand what was going on, but they knew something important was happening. We may not understand what is happening when we are in despair, but we can be sure that God is with us and we can cling to the hope of resurrection, foreshadowed in transfiguration.

Mountaintops are an important part of the faith journey, but they are not ends in themselves. They are the way that we are better prepared to be in the valleys, to live out the covenant of being Jesus' followers. "Like Peter, we face the temptation of becoming entrenched in our mountaintop experiences, wanting to live safely apart from the struggles and desperation of those who seek justice in an unjust world. As tempting as it is, we cannot get comfortable on the mountaintop, for we are just passing through. We must only rest awhile on our journey back down the mountain, to more fully love justice in the day-to-day difficulties of trying to live the gospel in a broken world."ⁱⁱ

We are called to be those who radiate the love of God to those who most desperately need to see and know God's love. We are invited to visit the mountaintop, and to keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus. But we are also to come back down the mountain into the valley where we are to see all the people and to respond to their needs.

Rev. Steve Garnaas Holmes concludes a meditation on this passage by saying, "In all your struggles—for justice in the world, or for peace in one neighbor's life—whatever your failures, whatever ruinous collapses you foresee, know this: before the tragedy, before the awful descent, in love you are already risen, already shining. Go in peace. Go with courage. Go in hope."ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ GBOD, "See All The People" Epiphany Part 2 – Linda Furtado

ⁱⁱ Bruzzese, Michaela "Struggling Through the Valleys" in Sojourner's Preaching the Word.

ⁱⁱⁱ Garnaas-Holmes, Steve "I Have Seen the Risen Church" meditation for Feb. 28, 2019.