

"Happy Valentine's Day!"
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – Feb. 14, 2021

PLEASE READ:
II Kings 2:1-12
Mark 9:2-9

Happy Valentine's Day, everyone! I hope you know that you are *special*. I hope you know that you are uniquely *beautiful*. I hope you know that you are *loved*! ...

I wonder how you feel when I say those words to you. There's something in my Swiss blood that just makes me uncomfortable saying such bold positive things. Sadly, we rarely hear the words, "I love you!" And it's because it makes us vulnerable... In a recent British survey, it was shown that over half of a study group of a thousand people said that they could only say, "I love you" after a waiting period of 1-3 months. The reason is, of course, that you hope you'll hear a response of "I love you, too!"

This obviously will vary from culture to culture, but I think for many adults, Valentine's Day is a hard day, because we'll be reminded of a relationship, a friendship or marriage that is either broken or not what we want it to be. In grade school Valentine's Day was always a day of anxiety because where I lived, we made cards for our classmates, and it became a competition to see how many Valentine cards you got. I was more interested in the candy, honestly, but it was painful to see when one of our classmates didn't get as many cards as he or she wanted. A day supposed to celebrate love instead turned into a day of disappointment and self-doubt. I guess that's why tomorrow is SAD. Did you know that tomorrow is "Single Awareness Day"?

Today is also the Sunday in the Christian calendar when we commemorate what is called the "transfiguration" of Jesus. It marks the end of the season of Epiphany, and turns us toward the season of Lent, which begins this Ash Wednesday. One colleague confessed he didn't think we left Lent from last year, we've been so COVID deprived...

Nonetheless, the transfiguration is an incredible story, and an encouraging story. Peter and brothers James and John followed Jesus up a high mountain six days after Peter had declared Jesus to be the Christ. Peter was still confused as to what that meant, and Jesus rebuked him when Peter protested that Jesus' would have to suffer. Perhaps they were still pondering the meaning of Jesus' words when he took these three of his closest disciples on a hike up to the mountaintop. And Mark writes, "There, [Jesus] was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white... and there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus..."

I'm not going to pretend to know exactly what was going on up there - I don't need to tell you this is an experience which goes beyond rational explanation, at least physically speaking. What *is* understandable is that *those who were close to Jesus* were given a miraculous testimony as to his identity. It was not only a moment of transfiguration for Jesus, but *a transfiguring experience for the disciples*.

Jesus was revealed to them as the ultimate revelation of God, the one who embodied the fullness of God's Word in the Law and the Prophets. Moses was the one through whom God revealed the Law, and Elijah was the greatest of the prophets. As Armin read for us in the II Kings text, Elijah was transported to heaven in a flaming chariot! According to Jewish tradition, neither Moses nor Elijah tasted death; they were forerunners of the great day of the final age. If you look in the last two sentences of the Old Testament, you will find God saying, "*Before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, I will send you the prophet Elijah.*"

On top of that hill, then, the disciples were privileged to witness the confirmation of Jesus by the two great leaders of Jewish history. Imagine how you would respond to such a miraculous event? Mark writes the disciples were terrified (the word here is *ekphoboi*, and can be translated literally, *scared out...*). Peter, in his typically impulsive manner, blurts out an offering to make three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

The tents Peter had in mind were probably the same tents used in the Feast of the Tabernacles, a Jewish festival which celebrates the coming and ultimate triumph of the people of Israel. Peter possibly thought the final Day had come and God had come to live with God's people. Peter wanted to build tents for the leaders who brought the Final Age.

I love Peter - and this is so typical of him - He is dazzled and awed by the powerful supernatural reality which Christ reveals, but when it comes to following Jesus, we know he struggled. You get the idea that even God has had enough of Peter' frenetic activity. As if to silence and still him, a cloud appears and enveloped them, and a voice says: "*This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!*"

How often we get caught up in our own expectations of life and our own plans for fulfillment and even our own attempts to realize God's plans. So quickly our attention slips away from the One *who can* give us new life. Like Peter, we need to have a reality check and be reminded that listening is a key spiritual discipline. Listening and obeying Jesus' command to love is the way to experience the joyful freedom God desires for us.

Too many of us are enamored with the extraordinary, exotic, esoteric, the bling bling of dazzling, mystical, mysterious spiritual experience. Did you see Ruth Graham's article in the Times this week? She reports that "Prophecy is a facet of the fast-growing charismatic Christian movement... Christian prophets are meeting a hunger for reassurance and clarity that can be observed in other corners of American culture. Astrology," Graham reports, "is exploding in popularity. More than 40 percent of Americans believe in psychics, according to the Pew [Research Center]."¹

¹ Ruth Graham, "Christian Prophets Are on the Rise. What Happens When They're Wrong?" (*New York Times*, February 11, 2021).

We forget the stuff of life is primarily made of our day-to-day experiences. Our faith is lived primarily in the monotony of routine. We may have mountaintop experiences, and I will admit I have had my own transfiguring experiences. But suddenly such awe-inspiring events are over, and we must come down from the mountain.

If we only expect new life to come from the unexpected and the miraculous, then we have not heard the good news of Christ, for his message of salvation is *for each moment - even each and every moment - of our lives*. Fantastic events in life may be a blessing, and while they can be an adrenalin-fed *turning point of faith*, they cannot be the constant *focal point* of faith. Ironically, we can be side-tracked like Peter by the supernatural, and we need conversion from inattention back to attending to God's way.

During a dry season in the New Hebrides, the missionary John G Paton, awakened the derision of the natives by digging for water. The indigenous people said that water always came down from heaven, not up through the earth. But Paton revealed a larger truth than they had seen before by revealing to them that heaven could give them water through the soil upon which they stand.

How often do we insist on waiting for God to send blessing in some supernatural form from the heavens, when all the while God is giving abundant supply if we would only learn to move more deeply into the fertile places of everyday life where, as Jesus said, the wells of living waters seek to rise... The gift of snow, or a sunrise, or a bird or other animal in nature, or the stars at night, or the simple act of kindness of a loved one, or the fact that we have running water, or light at the flip of a switch, or heat, luxuries that millions of people in our world will never know...

I've often felt that God often interrupts us even through hardship and crises, maybe even through pandemic, to remind us of the grace, which is for us anytime, anywhere: "This is my own Son, whom I love. *Listen to him.*"

My favorite definition of prayer is paying attention. Perhaps part of that is simply listening... Have you heard God's voice every now and then? Jesus words are clear, "God so loved the world..." "They will know you are my disciples by your love..." The apostle Paul goes on to talk about "a more perfect way..." I read that famous passage on love yesterday at the wedding for Wynne and Chelsea, and it was a powerful reminder to me of how love is not flashy red roses and chocolates (as much as I like all of that), but rather a volitional act, a choice day after day, to give away your life in sacrificial love.

It is important to listen to Jesus words of affirmation and love, because he also calls us to pick up our cross and follow him; Jesus calls us to let go of life as we know it so that we might be set free to receive new life; he calls us to a radical servanthood and a change of heart - We are to love God and neighbor even as we love ourselves; we are to pray for our enemies and turn the other cheek so that our joy will be complete.

The Good news is that the promise of everlasting life, the glory that was revealed so brilliantly on that mountaintop is not simply for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. The promise of new life is for all who will listen and live according to God's word, who are willing to be doers of the word, who will not just be a prophetic voice but who will take a stand for love in a world too often gone astray with self-serving injustice, violence, and deceit.

This past Tuesday the Session welcomed new members into the congregation. As a covenant community, the ceremony involves pledges on both parts. The new members made promises, among other things, to obey God's word and to show his love. We, the Session, also make promises "to strengthen their ties with the household of God through our faithful fellowship and love..."

There weren't any bright lights or visions during that brief ceremony, but we hope that our community is now a little richer for having them, and that we all will be encouraged as we give ourselves anew to a community defined by *God's love*.

I don't know if you knew this, but St. Valentine is the patron saint of lovers, of course, but also of *beekeepers*. Bees until the 19th century were the symbol of the papacy. I've always thought that was because bees are one of the life forms on the planet who produce beautiful fruit that is *largely enjoyed by others*. Particularly worker bees faithfully and selflessly serve. Perhaps this is the highest form of love in any relationship or community life?

So Happy Valentine's Day! Remember that you are special, uniquely beautiful, and loved. God is sending you a constant barrage of love letters, reminders that you are beloved and that the deepest joy in life comes from going back down from the mountaintops of life to the everyday, even mundane tasks of lovingly giving ourselves away. Today we turn from the various epiphanies of Christ to our spiritual journey of the way of the cross to Easter new life. As we move through the season of Lent, the metrics of spiritual maturity always will be for us a rather simple calculus: *Are you becoming a great lover of God and a great lover of your neighbor or not?* It's really that simple. Paradoxically, as we journey with Christ even along the way of the self-giving love of the cross, that will make for a very Happy Valentine's Day and a loving transfiguration for us, and all creation.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.