

## **"Morphing"**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. R. Scott Herr**

**First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – February 27, 2022**

**PLEASE READ:**

**Exodus 34:29-35**

**Luke 9:28-36**

On this last Sunday before Lent, our gospel lesson describes the mountain top experience when Jesus' face changes and his clothes become dazzling white - when Moses and Elijah appear in heavenly glory to talk with Jesus about how he will soon fulfill God's purpose by dying in Jerusalem. This astonishing event we call The Transfiguration of the Lord.

This week two unrelated events on Thursday happened that make our lesson today about the Transfiguration of particular relevance. The first was the memorial service for Steve Benko. It was the public remembrance of one of our town's great heroes. The service marked the passing of not only a beloved husband, father, and member of our congregation, but an extraordinary example of a servant leader, a legend in his own time. And now he is gone, and things have changed. What that change means is yet not clear for everyone who knew and loved him, but clearly life will be different without Steve.

Secondly, we all woke up to learn that Russia invaded Ukraine, triggering what some suggest could become the most significant ground war in Europe since WWII. 100,000 people were killed, and 2.2 million people were displaced in the Bosnian War in the mid 1990's, so we pray not... Again, we don't know what these events mean for our future, but we do understand that a significant and unpleasant change is on the way. Vladimir Putin is violently overthrowing a sovereign nation and made a not-so-subtle threat that nuclear weapons are at his disposal should anyone attempt to stand in his way. This is stunning, really, and a wake-up call to all of us who have illusions that history is inevitably moving toward all sunshine and rainbows. We pray for peace, but there is no peace, and the changes that are happening are significant, but we don't know exactly what they mean for us.

In Matthew and Mark's rendering of the change that happens in Jesus, the verb used is the Greek word that translates more literally into the English *metamorphosis*. In Luke's gospel, the verb for the change is less distinct and can be translated any number of ways. I like the abbreviated version, *morph*. Change. Alteration. Moving from one state to another. And we know that in a general sense this is what life is all about. It was Heraclitus who once said, the only constant in life is change. Plato wrote that you can never step into the same river. Time is an ever-flowing torrent of change and every day we will face a change of some kind.

Change is exhausting for many of us, especially when it comes in the dramatic form of death or global crisis. You'll note that the three disciples were sound asleep when this supernatural event begins. While Jesus is receiving the glorious confirmation and approval to complete his saving work of redemption, his three companions were asleep.

In their dreams they were probably hoping for wonderful things to happen. But as the rest of Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem would reveal, they were focusing on false hope.

Jesus tried to make it clear that the changes he will bring will involve suffering and a death to the way it was before, the disciples' hopes were based on illusions of worldly power and success. They imagined at Jesus' side, power would be theirs. They were filled with false hopes, hopes that were dashed in the final hours of Jesus' passion.

I define hope for the Christian as a future fulfillment in which we presently invest. False hopes are those misguided dreams which will never be realized, much less bring fulfillment, because they have no basis in reality. Investment in false hopes is a waste of assets. We miss and even lose so much of the life God intends for us because our minds and our hearts are asleep in false hope. And there are many kinds of false hope that keep us dormant to the real joys and fulfillment found in Christ.

For example, there is the false hope of domination. This takes a variety of forms, from war and prejudice to office politicking and domestic violence in the home. We imagine that by wielding whatever power we have over someone else; we may gain security, status and prestige.

By controlling others, we feel a temporary sense of twisted satisfaction. But sooner or later, the hope of domination only proves us to be insecure and fearful. The hope of domination only brings defense and high walls of oppression and loneliness. This is Vladimir Putin's future. He is building his empire on sinking sand.

Closer to home, there is the false hope of social and financial security. Again, this takes on a variety of forms, from intellectual prominence to economic prowess. We delude ourselves with the notion that if we just have enough influence & friends, just enough money, our lives will be secure. I think that's why Steve's memorial service and the honors the town gave him were so significant. He was an example of the quintessential servant leader. He gave his life for others in faithful service for fifty years. As Eugene Peterson put it, his was "a long obedience in the same direction."

The American dream is still alive. But in the last year Americans have resigned *en masse*... The pandemic has brought us to a time of reckoning. Many have become frustrated with the false hope which society and financial affluence offers. Many have given up hope in the hollow promises of politicians and market analysts. In the midst of a global pandemic when hundreds of millions of people have died, more than ever, we see the futility of putting our hope in social and financial security.

Some of us simply live with the illusion that whatever change is happening won't affect me. This flies in the face of one of the basic laws of the universe, called "Murphy's Law." I'm sure you've all heard of it, but the rudimentary version goes something like this: "If something can go wrong, it will." Or the version that's my favorite, "If you've just buttered

your toast and it falls on the floor, more often than not it will land with the buttered side down. If you put jam on also, the probability will increase. If you just had the floor carpeted, the probability of the butter and jam side hitting the carpet will directly increase according to the cost of the new carpet."

More seriously, there is a good chance that we will all face suffering and loss. No, let me restate that: I *guarantee* that everyone of us will face suffering and loss. It is part of life. If we put our hope in everything turning out o.k., the proverbial rude awakening to the fact that we are ultimately not in complete control of our lives will come upon us. I learned early on that you can't be disillusioned if you don't have any illusions. Yes, bad things do happen to good people. And when we awaken, we are afraid. Hoping on the things of this world - anything or anyone, will prove disappointing at least, and fatal at worst. There are so many kinds of false hope, and you might reflect on those in which you invest.

The disciples Peter, John and James awoke to find themselves in the dazzling and overwhelming presence of the Lord. Delirious, they hoped to capture the moment and prolong the experience by suggesting making tents for the divine guests to reside. They were quickly overcome by the reality of God, their hopes were dashed, and they were afraid!

But then another fantastic thing happens. The Word of God comes to them. A voice from the cloud says, "This is my son, whom I have chosen - listen to him!" The Word of God turns them in their fear to Jesus and his love.

When we have false hope in the world, in ourselves, in the status we have, in the relationships and other securities, our hopes will be dashed. But that is not necessarily the end of us.

Along with the early disciples, we are told to listen to Jesus and to follow him. Hear his words and believe. "Do not be afraid." "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." "Whoever believes in me shall not perish but will have eternal life." "I will give you peace."

Like those first disciples, we also are invited to see, and are left trying to comprehend all that the vision of the morphing Christ includes. There is no way to do that without reference to the word "exodus" in verse 31. While sometimes translated as "departure," this word *occurs nowhere else in the gospels*. Only Luke gives the content of Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah, highlighting the importance of that conversation about exodus. Like Moses before him, Jesus is given an experience of God and God's majesty. Like Moses, in spite of being chosen, he is not granted easy passage. The word exodus is a reminder of plagues, blood, the death of first-born sons, and the unremitting recalcitrance of the oppressive power of the tyrants.

The connections with Exodus remind us that God will deliver God's people from slavery as often as God must do it. An exodus from under the power of any oppressor has a cost. Jesus must "set his face like a flint" to get to Jerusalem (9:51). The three disciples who will follow that road with him have seen the glory that awaits and find the path to Golgotha deeply confusing. Jesus' exodus will deliver even from the power of death, not just death-dealing powers-that-be, but death itself. That cannot be clear to Peter, James, and John until it has been accomplished, but it is now in this post-Easter reality clear for us.

I know Christians often pray to "Almighty God," but I'd like to suggest that the glory of God revealed in the Transfiguration of Jesus reveals an "All Vulnerable God." Jesus invites us to follow the way of the cross, of forgiveness, of turning the other cheek, of self-giving love. This is the strange glory of God revealed in Jesus. We don't have to wallow in false hopes. We don't have to hide behind facades of success or prestige, intelligence or beauty, power or powerlessness, conformity, or deviance. We may serve others gladly and freely. We may face inevitable suffering and hardship of this life with inner strength and peace. And slowly but surely, we will be transformed by God's Spirit to reflect the same glory of God's love and grace that we see in Jesus.

As we are morphing more into the likeness of Christ, people will see the look of love; they will see compassion and acceptance, patience, and forgiveness; they will see the face of Christ for them. They will not see us striving for domination, social or financial security, laying tracks over people in order to get our way. They will see people of integrity, fighting the good fight in the Spirit of Christ, hoping on him alone. And so, through us, seeing Christ, others may catch this hope.

That's our calling as we move from the season of Epiphany to the journey toward the cross of Lent. Morphing. Changing. Being transformed more into the likeness of the God revealed to us in Christ. That's our basis for any hope, and I believe that's the basis for the hope of the world.

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