

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY**

**Last Sunday After Epiphany - February 22, 2004**

**Transfiguration Sunday**

**Anne G. Cohen**

**Luke 9:28-43**

**For Our Reflection:**

No prophet ever sees things under the aspect of eternity. It is always partisan theology, always for the moment, always for the concrete community, satisfied to see only a piece of it all and to speak out of that at the risk of contradicting the rest of it.

- Walter Brueggemann The Prophetic Imagination (1978)

The prophets are the beating hearts of the Old Testament.

- Walter Rauschenbusch Christianity and the Social Crisis (1907)

A president's hardest task is not to do what is right, but to know what is right.

- Lyndon B. Johnson, Former President of the U.S.A.

**Dead Presidents, Dead Prophets**

Who was here last Sunday?

How would you characterize what we did here at the 10:00 hour?

What was the main point of the sermon?

What was the main point of the event?

\*\*\*

Your responses might indicate that I'm not a very effective worship planner or preacher. Or they might indicate that each one of us finds meaning in different ways and occurrences. Or they might indicate the existence of parallel universes...

Where can we look to find the TRUTH about what we did together last week? IS it possible to give a TRUTHFUL account of an event? We could probably agree on some of the facts: there WAS a sermon, we were here, candles were lit. But those are FACTS which may or may not convey THE TRUTH about the event. Is the truth in the prayers we prayed? the sermon title? the hymns we sang? the joys and concerns we expressed? the cumulative effect of these on each one of us?

\*\*\*

Back in the reign of King John F. Kennedy, we had a nuclear event. That event is now called The Cuban Missile Crisis. Russia planted missiles in Cuba - pointed them at the USA and we nearly "nuked" them to eradicate the threat.

A report on PBS claims that before Russia armed Cuba with missiles, the USA had armed and pointed missiles at Cuba. Who was on the defense or offense in this situation? What were the motivations of the people and countries involved? What was the TRUTH about the Cuban/US American/Russian Missile Crisis? If we knew the TRUTH - would it change us in any way?

\*\*\*

Today is TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY. What IS that?

We know that it is the name of a Christian observance based on three accounts of an event - real or imagined - that may have occurred approximately 2,000 years ago. We have heard ONE of those accounts read this morning - the one from the Gospel of Luke. So our experience of TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY in 2004 will be influenced by that choice of text.

As the story of The Transfiguration goes, Peter, James and John are taken up a mountain to pray. Jesus appears to glow at some point and have a conversation with two dead prophets - Moses and Elijah.

Both Moses and Elijah were known to be God-Talkers, meaning they spoke directly with God in their lifetimes. Both had visions. Both were revered in Jewish tradition. Both were expected to return to Earth before the Final Judgment (a whole other story). In this story, they are not just dead prophets. Their presence signifies something about Jesus' prophetic rank and identity.

The conversation they are having seems to center on Jesus' upcoming DEPARTURE "which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem." The Greek word translated here as DEPARTURE is EXODUS - a word that carries an enormous amount of weight in Judeo-Islamic-Christian tradition. The word DEPARTURE - carries its own weight in airports and bus terminals.

Peter then suggests building BOOTHS or TENTS or DWELLINGS for the dead and live prophets on the mountain. If we know that the three prophets are discussing another EXODUS, the inclination on the part of the three disciples to set up booths is perfectly logical. Jews do this yearly at the Festival of Booths, a Harvest celebration commemorating the EXODUS from Egypt. (Deut. 16)

While Peter is still speaking, a cloud over-shadows all of them - a sign of God's presence. Moses usually talked with God on a mountain top inside of a cloud. CLOUD - GOD - this makes sense.

At least three other things happen within this layered and complicated story. One, a voice comes out of the cloud claiming Jesus - not just as

friend and co-worker (as was claimed of Moses and Elijah) - but as SON. This is more than a hint that Jesus is closer to God than the other major dead prophets. This event also connects this story to Jesus' BAPTISM - during which the same voice spoke and similar words were said.

Second, the Disciples who came to the mountain to pray with Jesus were sleepy - "weighed down with sleep" - but managed to stay awake to witness the event. This connects this TRANSFIGURATION event with the GETHSEMANE garden event - in which the Disciples betrayed Jesus on the night of his arrest - an event which hasn't happened yet in the timeline of this story but HAS already occurred in the time of the TELLING of this story.

BAPTISM -- PASSION -- And in the middle, TRANSFIGURATION. These are the three touchstones of the story of Jesus - the events that reveal his importance, his identity, his mission.

The third thing that I notice - at the end of the story - is that the disciples keep quiet about the experience. This may be a device to explain why this story is only NOW coming to light - 30 - 50 years later. This may be a Christian apologetic. Or it may only be a description of the emotional effect that such an extraordinary event has on ordinary people.

So, what are the FACTS, what is the TRUTH, what is the MEANING - of the TRANSFIGURATION? These are three very separate and different questions.

The FACTS are that this is a story that was passed through oral tradition until it was written down in Greek at least three times.

It may or may not stem from actual events.

The story was important to a group of people who preserved it in a variety of forms and translated it into multiple languages over time.

Is it a TRUE story? Perhaps.

Is it a MEANINGFUL story? It depends - on who tells it, who hears it, and what their interpretations and contexts are.

How is it a MEANINGFUL story? It depends - on who tells it, who hears it, and what their interpretations and contexts are.

This story has elements of a variety of traditions and stories:

Gethsemane, Baptism, Human Close Encounters with Deity, Exodus, Post-Exodus Rituals, Dead Prophets Society Meetings, Pre-Passion Planning, and Christian Apologetics - MAYBE. And I'm convinced that there is a lot more that we don't see - but might discover if we read this as Jewish Midrash.

Is this a FACTUAL story? Its existence is a fact.

Is it a TRUE story? There may be truth communicated in the story -

especially truth about what was and is important to people who label themselves Christians. It may also carry - within its metaphors and images - some truth about how some human beings experience the presence of the Divine in their lives.

Is it a MEANINGFUL story? It seems to be - for many people. We are still telling it. It must serve a purpose. Purpose usually pairs with meaning.

So what can our exploration of this story tell us about TRUTH or THE TRUTH? Is there only personal truth distilled from experience, reason and revelation? OR is there such a thing as Ultimate or Universal Truth? And how does that relate to human reality - if at all?

My favorite Rabbi, Lawrence Kushner, translates the Hebrew word EH'MET as meaning both TRUTH and VISION. And he suggests the following about TRUTH and REALITY.

\*\*\*

Reality may be read through an infinity of lenses. Each refraction carries its own unique bias. Children speak of true or false; adults know better. This is not to say that we have given up on truth, only that we now understand how elusive it is. Nor is it to suggest that truth is relative. Indeed we now suspect there is an absolute truth and that it is mysteriously connected to what some people call GOD. God is not truth but standing in God's presence may be. How matters appear to God, that is true.

WE CHOOSE OUR TRUTH BY THE SCOPE OF OUR VISION. To see beyond the present and beyond the end of our allotted days is to understand why we have been created. As our priorities are rearranged, meaning is revealed, truth glistens. To see our place in creation, in other words, is an act of faith. To comprehend our intended task is our only shot at glimpsing what is enduring and absolutely true...

And what can be told of what we finally see? Only that All Being at its core is One. Everything else may be false...

A fact is always the same. Once you learn it, you have it forever. But truth is different. Once you understand it, you are forever changed and THE TRUTH disappears. And because you are now someone else, you must learn it all over again. (The Book of Words pp.115-16)

\*\*\*

If Kushner is right, its no wonder that we are confused about the TRUTH when it comes to human events. Much of our understanding of human events comes from REPORTS or stories told by JOURNALISTS ABOUT those events - other humans who, in spite of vows to remain neutral observers, always view events and facts through the lens of their unique biases.

One of our US publications that one might say has a hard core LIBERAL bias is THE NATION. Their February 23rd issue has an article that begins with these words:

George W. Bush's budget is a true lie. Framed for the election campaign, it lies about the causes and depths of our staggering fiscal decline, masks the costs of Bush's tax cuts and his wars, hides the hit the poor will take and the lucre the rich will get. Yet this election-year budget also tells the truth about Bush's priorities....Tax cuts...and...War.

(Robert L. Borosage, "Bush's Budget Lies," The Nation February 23, 2004, p.4)

This article raises the question about what is TRUTH and what is NOT. We are in a national debate over what is TRUE about the US war on Iraq. What are the facts about this war?

Our Congress gave war powers to our President.

Our President mobilized our Armed Forces.

Our Armed Forces took violent possession of the Country of Iraq.

But what are the facts that went INTO the decisions to act - as each party and person chose to act? What are the NON-FACTS that went into those same decisions? What interpretations of those same FACTS and NON-FACTS led to those decisions?

What is the TRUTH about the US War on Iraq? This has yet to be revealed, although many of us have our own opinion - and our own belief about what GOD must think of all of this.

What is the MEANING of the US War on Iraq? This too will unfold over time. But the MEANINGS of this war - as with any war - are as multiple and various and complex as people and perceptions, as experiences, reason and revelation.

As I contemplate the TRANSFIGURATION story, I find myself wishing that our current president might have attended some meetings of the Dead Presidents' Society - and learned from FDR and Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy - the TRUTH about being a wartime president.

He might have gleaned the insights that each came to after leading a country into and/or out of violent conflict with other nations - the wisdom that comes from being responsible for the decision to kill and dismember other human beings. They might have shared their triumphs and regrets, the beliefs that went into their decisions, their learning curve, their shifts in values. Dead Presidents may have been able to give President Bush some 20/20 hindsight which he could have used as foresight - just as the Dead Prophets may have passed the same onto Jesus.

What is TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY?

Well - today - this is it - for us, in this moment.

How would we describe it to someone not present?

A page from each of us might give that someone a SENSE of this event - but none of our pages will be identical and none of them would describe that PERSON's experience had they been here this morning.

A fact is always the same. Once you learn it, you have it forever. But truth is different. Once you understand it, you are forever changed and THE TRUTH disappears. And because you are now someone else, you must learn it all over again. (The Book of Words p.116)

May God bless our search for TRUTH with MEANINGFUL dialogue and a sense of GOD's PRESENCE in the events of our lives.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Bulletin**

#### **WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION**

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship - A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship (responsive) Billy Graham

One: "Love is not a vague feeling or an abstract idea.  
When I love someone, I seek what is best for them.  
If I begin to take the love of Christ seriously,  
then I will work toward what is best for my neighbor.  
I will seek to bind up the wounds and bring about healing,  
no matter what the cost may be."

Many: May God guide our actions and our thoughts  
so that love is our reason for being.  
Let us worship God.

+ Hymn of Peace This Is My Song Hymnal # 591

+ Peace Prayer (unison) Dwight D. Eisenhower  
"Every gun that is made, every warship launched,  
every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense,  
a theft from those who hunger and are not fed,  
those who are cold and are not clothed.  
This world in arms is not spending money alone.  
It is spending the sweat of its laborers,  
the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children."

God, forgive us our war-making.  
God, give us the wisdom for peace-making. Amen.

+ Our Common Prayer (unison) adapted by Parker J. Palmer

Heavenly Father, heavenly Mother,  
Holy and blessed is your true name.  
We pray for your reign of peace to come,  
We pray that your good will be done,  
Let heaven and earth become one.  
Give us this day the bread we need,  
Give it to those who have none.  
Let forgiveness flow like a river between us,  
>From each one to each one to each one.  
Lead us to holy innocence  
Beyond the evil of our days -  
Come swiftly Mother, Father, come.  
For yours is the power and the glory and the mercy:  
Forever your name is All in One. Amen

Time for Silent Reflection

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at  
peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

God, like forgiveness, flows like a river between us. Blessed Be.

Sung Response "Hallelujah. God be praised!" (CSB #5  
Refrain)

### **WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM**

Just Peace Moment

Conversation with Our Children

The Blind People and the Elephant

Reading from the Christian Gospels Luke 9:28-43

Sermon Dead Presidents, Dead Prophets

### **WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION**

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer Be still and know that I am God

Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response In Solitude Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison) Oscar Romero

Peace is not the product of terror or fear.

Peace is not the silence of cemeteries.

Peace is not the silent result of violent repression.

Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all  
to the good of all.

Peace is dynamism. Peace is generosity. Amen.

+ Sending Hymn Praise to the Living God Hymnal # 8

+ Commissioning (unison) Dwight D. Eisenhower

"I think that people want peace so much that one of these days  
government had better get out of their way and let them have it."  
May it be so.

+ Sung Response (we gather in some semblance of a circle)

Song from Ghana

+ Postlude

### **WORSHIP NOTES**

Call to Worship is based on a quotation from Billy Graham

in Peace Prayers Ed. by the staff of Harper San Francisco (p.97)

Peace Prayer based on a quotation from Dwight D. Eisenhower, Ibid.(p.23)

Prayer of Dedication by Oscar Romero, Ibid. (p.130)

Commissioning based on a quotation from Dwight D. Eisenhower, Ibid.(p.81)