

Transfiguration Sunday, Year C
February 27, 2022
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson
Luke 9:28-36

“The Face of Jesus”

Does anyone here remember the first time they prayed? Do you remember the first prayer that you learned by heart or how or when you were even taught to pray? Odds are that the Lord’s Prayer is among the first prayer many of us were taught or memorized. Maybe it was a table prayer your family said before meals. My family was partial to this one – “Come Lord Jesus, be thou our guest, and let these gifts to us be blest. Amen.” If you have any roots or connections with mid-western Lutherans you might also be familiar with that one. I know there are some among us who did not grow up with formal religious traditions in their families, and so perhaps for some of us our first prayers were simple and spontaneous ones, prayers born out of a faith not yet defined by any particular tradition, but out of a growing sense of connection and relationship with a Loving Being beyond ourselves. It is truly amazing to me just how universal the practice of prayer is, even as its variations are endless, the heart of prayer is the same – a ritual, a habit of approaching and encountering the Divine.

The story of the Transfiguration we have read this morning from Luke’s gospel account, has one unique feature from the other synoptic gospels. While both Matthew and Mark also tell a nearly identical story of Peter, James, and John going up a mountain with Jesus where suddenly his face and clothes become brighter and more dazzling than all the glitter used in the whole of Carnival season, one small place where they diverge is that in Luke’s accounting Jesus is praying when this spectacular event happens. It’s a seemingly minor detail – one that

apparently didn't have much consequence for Matthew and Mark, that I think today begs our further examination. Luke has a habit of embedding important revelatory events in Jesus' ministry in Jesus' practice of prayer –his baptism, his calling and choosing the 12 disciples, and in the verses before this story, when he asks Peter the question – “who do you say that I am?”

So once again in a defining moment of the gospel story we have Jesus praying, on a mountain top, away from the crowds, his profound connection with God on full display through this spectacle where God's glory is revealed in a show of light, in the appearance of two of Israel's greatest prophets and leaders, Moses and Elijah, and then in a cloud that envelops the party and speaks, echoing the words of affirmation heard at Jesus' baptism – “This is my Son, My Chosen/Beloved, listen to him!” By setting this story in the context of prayer, Luke's version of the Transfiguration serves to remind us that powerful transformative moments don't have to be just so called “Mountain Top” experiences. We can encounter God in our daily, hectic, and ordinary lives, through our regular practice of prayer.

With the season of Lent nearly upon us we have an opportunity before us to use the discipline of Lent to cultivate more fully our prayer life – both as individuals and as a community. Perhaps you already have a daily regular habit of prayer. You pray everyday at a certain time like clock-work – please teach me your ways. But perhaps you would like to learn new ways of praying that can enrich your already healthy prayer life. Perhaps the practice of prayer in your life has been real hit or miss (lately or always) – there always seems to be something more pressing, something or someone who needs your attention and energy until you fall into bed at night exhausted. Lately I've been falling into this category. The most holy and prayerful part of my day is rocking my son to sleep and sending up a quick word of thanks.

Perhaps you don't even know where to start in cultivating a practice of daily or regular prayer. I know personally, that I my prayer life is not where I want it to be. And so while the season of Lent, often defined by abstention and the "giving-up" of things and vices, can instead be for us a time where to take on a new discipline, where we add something of value, like a new prayer practice, to our lives.

And don't worry, you're not going to do this alone. We may be tempted to think that a regular prayer life is solely about our personal relationship with God, and while that is an important aspect of it, our prayers even prayed by ourselves are still very much part of the communal life of faith that we share together. Each of our prayer lives grows out of our communal experience of prayer. And in turn our personal practice of prayer is poured back into the praying life of the community. This sort of symbiosis is one way that the Spirit draws us together and strengthens our bonds, when we are together and when we are apart. Our practice of prayer is not going to be earth shatteringly profound and awe-inspiring. There are times where this is hard and tedious. We can get discouraged and feel like our prayers are useless or just not enough. There are times when we cannot pray ourselves, when we feel too disconnected, sad, angry, confused, or hopeless to pray, and in those moments others prayers sustain us, until we can pray again.

If you're starting from scratch or it's been awhile cultivating and sustaining a regular prayer practice doesn't have to be that hard either. I'm not asking anyone to wake up at 2am and start praying the hours or the Divine office. Start small – 5 minutes a day, maybe less, consistency and simplicity is key here. Start with the prayers you know – the Lord's prayer. Use the prayer list emailed out each week. Start a journal. Use post-it notes. Words don't always

have to be your prayer. You can draw or conjure up in your mind's eye images of people and places where you ask for God's help and presence. You can go on a walk and pray, or you can just simply sit in silence.

A robust life of prayer invites us to be transfigured each and everyday, in small and at first seemingly unnoticeable ways, until our prayers become more than just words, more than just our petitions, but an ongoing conversation where we leave ourselves and our hearts open to all the possibilities of God's response of care, healing, peace, and wholeness. We are also spurred to action from our prayers, for we hear the call of Christ to "come follow me" and God's voice saying "listen to him!" Our prayers are not just empty words meant to placate our hearts and be yet another performative act so others think we are good people, but prayer is one way that we participate in God's redemption, reconciliation, and transformation of the world. This Lent I invite us all to pray without ceasing and in turn see the dazzling face of Christ reflecting God's glory and shining a light in our lives and in the world.