

February 15, 2015
Falcon Heights Church UC
St. Paul, MN
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

Transfiguration Sunday
2 Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
Mark 9:2-9

LISTENING TO JESUS

Both our scripture passages today have an otherworldly feel to them. They describe mysterious scenes that are hard for us to imagine. Hebrew prophets in the first; and some 700 years later, in the second story, we have Jesus, two deceased Jewish leaders and three frightened and confused disciples. Chariots and horses of fire, dust-filled whirlwind in the first. A luminous face lit from within, dazzling white raiment in the second. Are they real scenes? Vividly recorded personal visions? We are not sure. My eyes reflexively squint as my mind struggles to picture these scenes. These are ancient narratives, preserved across the centuries for the purpose of giving us glimpses of the mystery of God. And in both narratives, the presence of God, the Almighty, is linked to certain people who seem to have strange, out-of-the-ordinary, almost superhuman qualities. God is portrayed as an awe-inspiring and overwhelming presence who is hidden by fire, then later obscured by a bright cloud. How do we as 21st century people, who don't regularly see scenes like this except in B movies, engage these texts? How might these narratives guide us in this interim period at Falcon Heights Church, United Church of Christ, as we seek to better understand God's vision and purposes for this congregation in transition?

As I have wrestled with these texts this week, I've been also pondering and preparing for the upcoming Lenten season. Lent has traditionally served as the time of reflection and spiritual preparation for the events of Holy Week and the transforming presence of the Risen Christ in our lives at Easter. During History Sunday last week, many of you participated in small groups where you shared both times of joy and disappointment in your experience in this congregation. After transcribing over 100 sticky notes, so our Discovery Team can summarize them, I was encouraged by the wild mix of delight and gratefulness experienced by many of you. And, I was troubled by the depth of hurt, bitterness and lingering anger the notes revealed. As the Worship Ministry Team and I met this last week, we explored ways that the Lenten season might help us move forward as a congregation. How might Lent invite us into some personal reflection, some prayerful individual wondering about your own actions/inactions in this complicated church system? And perhaps, in the Lenten call to humility and repentance, how might we encourage a move toward forgiveness and hope among you?

In my Lenten preparation, I have been revisiting a book called "Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in Congregations," by John Ackerman. He describes what he sees as a distinct change in Christian spirituality in the last 50 years. I

think that exploring this shift in emphasis may give us a clue about these divine encounters described in today's scripture readings. It also may suggest a way forward where there are still broken hearts and wariness among us.

In his introduction, Ackerman presents a challenging picture of the change in Christian spirituality in the last 50 years. Ackerman writes:

There has been a sea change in the past 50 years in the nature and character of Christian spirituality. In the 1950s, spirituality was centered in churches. That was where one found God. Churches were organized with top-down authority. Scholars had more authority than laypeople, and the ordinary person in the pew found comfort in an institution. The tectonic shift has moved us from **spirituality found in a place of dwelling to spirituality experienced in a group of seekers.**"

He goes on to describe how "habitation spirituality focuses on the God who has a sacred space in heaven and on earth in which humans can dwell. Before the 1960s this belief was the predominant expression of spirituality in America. A 'seeking spirituality,' which arose in the 1960's, is characterized by knowing God on the journey rather than in houses of worship alone. In a 'dwelling spirituality,' experts provide guidance for the laity, and a systematic way of thinking and behaving prevails. A 'seeking spirituality' is focused not on a place so much as on the activity of search for meaning, journeying through life. The new pattern accepts a great deal of diversity and choice. At its worst, it is a shopping-mall mentality; at best, searching acknowledges that one style of spirituality does not fit all."

If I understand Ackerman correctly, one way of relating to God is knowing God in a place, such as a church community. Another way to relate to God is connected with knowing God on a journey, on the move. He notes, "Both patterns are ancient." Both habitation/dwelling spirituality and journey/seeking spirituality can be found in our scriptures. "Traditionally," Ackerman continues, "dwelling spirituality constructs the Temple in Jerusalem and finds God in the Holy of Holies; seeking spirituality is found in the [journey through the Exodus in the wilderness of the] desert, in the words of the prophets." A sense of belonging to tribe and congregation, our place of worship becomes a safe haven where we can find answers to life's perplexing questions. God as "a mighty fortress," "the rock of ages," the refuge to which we can flee in life's challenges. All of these are biblical images which, rightfully so, both define and sustain us. What Ackerman is suggesting is that this image of church is not going to sustain and challenge the enormous complexity, rapid changes and diversity of the 21st century world.

And what struck me when I studied our Old and New Testament texts for today was that both narratives seem to challenge any kind of **nostalgia for place**. Before we get to the final demise and departure of the prophet Elijah, both the book of Joshua and I Kings tell the story of an amazing travel itinerary for

Elijah and his protégé Elisha. They travel to the place where the Israelites first camped after crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land, but they keep going. On to a sacred temple site of the Northern Kingdom, Bethel, but they keep moving. Back to Jericho, where the Hebrew people first triumphed over the Canaanites, and on to the Jordan River where the people had crossed in a miraculous fashion. These holy sites are all bypassed; **there is no lingering in place.** As it becomes clearer that Elijah the mentor is going to die and leave Elisha, there is no certainty about where or when; only that it is going to happen in an extraordinary manner that will pierce Elisha to his bones.

In the New Testament story, we find Jesus' disciples in much the same situation as the young student prophet Elisha. The disciples are getting a hint of what is coming next, as Jesus has begun to talk with them about the fact that he is going to go to Jerusalem, even though it is dangerous for him. He speaks of suffering at the hands of the religious and political authorities and that he will die. Like Elisha, the disciples don't really know when or where; only that Jesus appears to be warning them of his own death and their own eventual suffering in following him. And when they get to this mountaintop scene in all its glory, it will not be surprising that the disciples press for a new habitation, a place to memorialize. They will yearn for a "dwelling spirituality," as Ackerman would describe it. Better to stay and commemorate a glorious past than to press ahead into the uncertain future. This is also a challenge for us in churches, be it in celebrating anniversaries as a congregation or looking ahead to new ministries.

The disciples immediately want to build a shelter to commemorate what they have seen: Jesus glowing radiant and bright, Moses there representing God's law to the Jews, and Elijah of the Jewish prophetic tradition. Both key figures right there with him, symbolizing the whole known Jewish tradition in Jesus' time. "Rabbi," cries Peter: "it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah!" A place where this amazing scene will never change! But a cloud overcomes them and they hear a voice: "This is my beloved son" – same words as after Jesus is baptized, but with an addition – "This is my Beloved, *listen to him!*" And "suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus." And immediately they are on the move again, following Jesus back into the teeming crowds, the healings and preaching, the impending confrontations with the authorities. So much for staying in place.

Jesus would not let them build booths to preserve this scene; he will not let them stay there on the mountaintop. God's instructions? Listen to Jesus. *Keep moving and listen.* This really is the invitation the church offers to the wider community. Come, we don't give you all the answers, but we will journey with you as together we listen to Jesus in a rapidly changing world. Join us as we will search the scriptures, pay attention to the changing needs of the world, and prayerfully discern God's guidance together.

The challenge for any congregation is that our dwelling, our place and our history, our rootedness in beloved traditions together, cannot be our primary

focus. Today's texts name our tendency to "build booths," to only memorialize a beloved past. Be we are called to ongoing spiritual transformation of our hearts and souls. And this will change us and push us to more fully engage with our changing, hurting and needy world.

I invite you to join us during our Lenten journey this year, as we tune our ears into God's presence in our midst. Come party with us on Fat Tuesday; we will blow it out with fattening foods, music and fun. Then the mood will shift and we will end the evening in a brief affirmation of our human mortality with the ritual of receiving ashes on our foreheads or hands. Or stop by the church briefly on Ash Wednesday for "Ashes to Go." Join us in worship on Sundays in Lent as we explore the ancient seat of spiritual wisdom and transformation: the heart. How do our hearts harden? How do they soften and open? How might we look deep into our own hearts, and reflect on our own parts in the history of this church? How do we let bitterness and grievances of the heart begin to soften....to dissolve? What might the transformation of the heart look like? Let us continue to listen together as we journey through Lent. Amen.