

St James United Church



Message for February 11, 2024 Transfiguration Sunday

“A Time of Transition” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

2 Cor. 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9; “The Carrying” by Ada Limon (in *The Carrying*, Milkweed Editions, 2018)

Here we are, standing with Jesus on a mountaintop, watching as he shines like the sun while he speaks with Moses and Elijah and God says, “Listen to him.” It’s a powerful moment that we attend to each year, transitioning from the Sundays after Epiphany into Lent and on to Easter.

We read it each year in that context, but it means much more in the life of Jesus as Mark tells it. For him, this mountain moment is a fulcrum point for Jesus. He’s been climbing a figurative mountain up to this point, from, as we’ll recall next week, his baptism when God affirmed him as God’s beloved and he went into the wilderness to make sense of what that meant, on to calling his first disciples and traveling throughout the Galilee teaching and healing. Through that time his popularity grew and his disciples began to think that power and glory was his mission, so six days before today’s reading Jesus tells them about his coming death. Peter protests against this, prompting Jesus to accuse him of being Satan for being caught up in the world’s expectations and not God’s.

This is the context in which Jesus brings them up the mountain where even as he shines in God’s glory while he speaks with Israel’s greatest prophets, a cloud falls and God says, “Listen to him”. We don’t hear what he, Moses and Elijah are talking about so the command seems to point back to Peter’s protest, to Jesus’ words about his death and resurrection, and more than that, to his call to all who follow him to deny themselves and carry a cross with him. We are to attend not just to all that happened as he rose in fame but what will happen as it slips away, and so discover that the core of his mission isn’t prestige, or glory on a mountain, but self-emptying, sacrificing love.

This is something we wrestle with as followers of Jesus, at least I know that I do. I want to focus on the way up the mountain and not on the descent, even though that journey opens up into something life-giving, transformative and new. And so we’re given more than a day of transition but six weeks, the Season of Lent which this Sunday leads us into. I think of it as an opportunity to come down the mountain and follow Jesus to Jerusalem, pondering as I go all he meant about dying, and being raised from the dead.

Many of us will mark this reflective lead up to Easter by adding times of prayer and study into our routine as well as giving things up as a way to ponder what to release in our lives if we are to live into the message of Jesus. But we pray through this transition communally too, which takes on particular significance this year as we start our pilot partnership with Cochrane Street United Church on March 1. We’re kick starting the worship part of it next Sunday as they host

the service for the first time. This and future Sundays will echo our personal Lenten practice, as we try new things and set others aside. This is a congregational as well as a liturgical transition, so I invite you to look at it through a spiritual as well as a practical lens. On the Sundays when Cochrane hosts the service, there may be different hymns, unfamiliar anthems, new prayers. This is good, a chance to experience something new. And over these next months we'll have opportunities to meet new people, hear different ideas, discern projects to do together. Again, this is good. Like Jesus coming down the mountain as he goes on his way to Jerusalem, the end point is not death but resurrection.

And there can be renewal beyond just these congregations. As you know, we are starting this partnership in large because we are in the midst of another transition, a shift for the church as a whole. For a long time it felt like we were on an upward climb in terms of church life, with full sanctuaries, overflowing Sunday Schools, multiple generations gathered not just for worship but dinners, study programs, and the like. But over the last couple of decades, numbers have fallen, younger generations mainly absent, budgets tight and we wonder if we are in permanent descent. That can become the only thing on our minds, like assuming Jesus words were only about Good Friday. But I offer a couple of observations that lead us to Easter. First, look around and see the younger people who are here. Celebrate that. Celebrate the six people received into membership here this morning. Celebrate our evening services, a draw for people wanting a different take on worship or who need a time other than in the morning. Celebrate all of the families who were contacted over the summer who still consider St. James to be their spiritual home. And celebrate an interesting statistic we see not just in Canada but in Europe and in the US. People may not go to church as they once did but in poll after poll, they still profess belief in God, in Jesus, in a need for spirituality. Here's a stark example. In Iceland, only 2% of people go to church but 74% believe in God. This should be telling us something. As in our new partnership, we are perhaps being invited to imagine something new. One possibility is that we are to think less about who is coming to a building and more about going into the community to live the way of Jesus. And connected to that I wonder if we need to think of faith community in a more expansive way, perhaps ponder how church buildings were viewed in earlier times, as community spaces where different activities took place and various groups met and built relationships. As we do that again, we live into the words of Jesus, nurture his vision of sharing and mutual support, not the us and them prevalent in the world but the community spirit we will celebrate in communion.

Now I know it isn't easy. We're experiencing Ada Limón's "The Carrying". It's winter and all is seemingly dying. Yet there are flashes of colour and a mare carrying a foal, signs of new life. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, there's a veiling, and so a future we don't see, but beyond is God who brought light, who told Jesus' friends to listen to him and later raised him from the dead. This is a time of transition, liturgically, congregationally, socially, but transitions are not endings. They lead us to something new. May we journey through this transition trusting in that promise. Amen.