

Sermon March 2, 2014 Transfiguration Sunday Matthew 17:1-9 Exodus 24: 12-18  
“Prayer: Not a Spare Tire, but a Steering Wheel” (this idea from another pastor, name forgotten, years ago)

The phone rang. It was a member of my very first church, very upset. Her husband had had some health problems and been admitted to the hospital, and had just received a very bad, totally unexpected, diagnosis. The husband, whom I had met only once at a dinner since he did not attend worship, greeted me as a long-lost best friend when I got to the hospital and said, “We know you can pray me out of this. Please get God to make me well.”

I was floored at the time, unsure as to how to respond to his desperate words. Today I might be just as stymied, but in my heart, I know that prayer, as is suggested in the title of this sermon, is not meant to be a spare tire to use only when some sort of life-sized pot-hole tears up our lives, but a steering wheel, a *relationship*, a regular time during which we intentionally make ourselves listen for what God wants and let God direct us in our decisions and steps through life. A “spare-tire” relationship with God means that we call on God only when we think we need him; the rest of the time we pretty much stuff him in the trunk. A “steering wheel” relationship is for every day, every intersection, every twist and turn in our lives, when we try to let God’s way have a say, a pull, on our living. (General idea gleaned from another pastor years ago; identity unknown now)

Years ago on a university campus the late Dr. Halford Luccock was leading a discussion about religion. One student who disagreed with what Dr. Luccock was saying spoke out with scorn, “Religion is a lot of moonshine!” Dr. Luccock thought for a minute. Then he asked the student, “Have you ever seen a thirty-foot tide?” He went on to explain how the tide rolls in through the Bay of Fundy in Nova Scotia. When the tide is out, the basin and the bay are nothing but mudflats too treacherous to venture out on. Ships have to be held upright by huge wooden cradles. Then the tide comes in and piles up to a depth of thirty feet or more, so that ships are free to sail out to the ports of the world.

“What makes the difference between the mudflats and the tide?” asked Dr. Luccock, and then he answered his own question by saying, “Moonshine.” “For a tide,” he went on to explain, “is caused by the pull of the moon on the earth. It is the pull of another world on this world. And that essentially is what religion is. It is the pull of another world on this world. It is the pull of the world of spirit on the world of flesh. It is the pull of the life of God on the life of the world. It is the pull of the Cross on our crassness.” (Found in *Cups of Light*, by Clarence Cranford - altered by fte)

“Transfiguration” is an experience where we see the pull of God's life on our own life. It is where our perspective is made new, and we are deepened. It is a time on a mountain so that we can return to the everyday struggles with new direction and commitment. It may occur as we look into the sky; it may happen in church, or in prayer, or in a hospital room, or on the beach... Perspective may deepen during a study of the scriptures, or as a friend reaches out to you in a time of pain... Transfiguration happens when your experience of life is changed, when you understand God's involvement in your life in a new way.

A friend of mine recently posted a video on Facebook. A man became more and more agitated as first he almost hit a boy on a bicycle as he backed his car out of his driveway, then was cut off by inconsiderate drivers, then waited in a long line for coffee, and then had the aggravation of having someone cut right in front of him at the coffee shop when it was his turn. As he was leaving, a strange man came to him with a pair of glasses. When the man put them on, when he looked at a person he saw also a pop-up, like a text message, that said things like, "Just lost his job," "Desperately trying to take care of her kids," "Diagnosed with Cancer," "Needs a Hug." In other words, he saw behind the aggravations and veneers to the real needs of those with whom he came into contact. He saw everybody differently; they were transfigured for him.

Every year at the end of Epiphany, the Sunday before we begin Lent on Ash Wednesday, we take the trip up the mountain with Jesus, James, John, and Peter. Jesus' clothes and person become brilliant, and the three disciples see him with Moses (through whom God gave the Law) and Elijah (considered the greatest of the Prophets). Peter, in his do-something style, declares, "It's good to be here! Let's make a house for each of you and stay here."

Jesus sets him straight, indicating that they must leave the mountain and go to face all sorts of troubles. And that's what happens. Lent starts, and we begin to see the tension between what Jesus teaches and what the world will allow. Lent will end with the Cross on Good Friday, with those who should have recognized what God was doing in Jesus - reaching out with love and forgiveness to heal a broken, recalcitrant world - but instead saw only threats to their own ways of doing things.... So they crucified him.

Lent is a time for us to ask for vision, that we may SEE the ways we turn away from Jesus in our own days. It is a time to change the way we do things: to act out of love instead of whatever keeps us from loving.

There's no telling how God's "pull" can speak to you. One day in a former church I was in my office when a middle-aged neighbor who had been brain-damaged as a toddler came in, as he did most days. His name was Bill, and sometimes folks greeted him less than warmly, because he could get something into his mind and pester folks about it until they couldn't take it any more. But this day, which was shortly before Valentine's Day, I had a lot to do and so rather flippantly asked Bill, "Are you going to do anything special for Valentine's Day?" He answered, seriously, "Yes. I'm going to give my heart to Jesus." This was a transfiguring moment for me. Bill's words were so simple and totally profound that for that moment, I saw him and everything differently. There is nothing better we could do for this day. "I'm going to give my heart to the Lord."

It is a wonder, how God can take a brief encounter, a casual exchange, and make it into a message, and a powerful one at that. This is the way God works, up on a mountaintop or simply as we chat over our desks or listen over the telephone or walk down the street. God gives us what we need...God steers and leads us.

In Jesus' case, the experience on the mountaintop gave Jesus, and later the disciples and even the entire Christian church, perspective on the meaning of Jesus' life and death. It must have been a strengthening, affirming time for Jesus, given just before he turned his face toward the challenge of giving up his own life in Jerusalem.

When Moses went up on the mountain, he did not rush up there, grab the tablets containing the Ten Commandments, and then rush down like a triathlon runner might. Instead, he went and stayed on the mountain for a long time, some forty days, which gave the people below a lot of concern. But during that time with God, Moses received strength to see him through all that was coming. And it was the same for Jesus and his disciples; even though Peter wanted to hurry things along with his Type-A "Let's do something!", Jesus did not hurry. He was strengthened and guided for the long road to Jerusalem where he would give up his life on a cross.

A woman once told me, "I never pray, because it never worked for me. My brother was ill and he died. My mother got cancer and God didn't make her well. Prayer is worthless to me."

From her perspective, prayer was worthless, because she saw it ONLY as a way to try to get something out of God. I forget who it was that suggested that this approach to prayer is like thinking of God as a heavenly bell-hop; DO THIS, God, fix that!

The Bible, though, would have us know that to pray is to accept God in a relationship. Thank God for what you have. Let God hear your concerns; God already knows, but God loves for us to really talk to God. As we share things with God, we may hear or see them differently. The most difficult part of real prayer time: to be still and really listen to see if God speaks to your heart. Many times during prayer an idea will come, or a person will come to your mind as having a need, or perhaps you will just listen in silence and somehow feel calmer, less alone, and more hopeful. It takes time, though, like any relationship. It may feel awkward or empty or foolish. It's not. When you feel the most uncomfortable with prayer, your prayer is the best offering. "I don't feel you, God; I'm not sure you are here, but I am trying to offer you myself in this time. Please help me." That's one of the best prayers we can pray.

So here we are, about to begin the forty days plus of Lent. During the Lenten season, our Sunday scriptures will have us accompany Jesus on his walk toward Jerusalem. What lies ahead of us on our personal paths has yet to be revealed. We may have smooth roads, or we may hit unexpected pits and pot-holes that threaten to flatten our tires and knock the life and faith out of us.

All of us and each of us are challenged to undertake a Lenten discipline of prayer. Do not relegate prayer only to the trunk, to those times when life blows you away; instead, let prayer be your steering wheel, where you listen for God's way and dare to let it guide you, every day. You may notice someone who is hurting or lonely or in need of something you can provide; God may be nudging you to action. Or you may see and hear nothing: you may simply offer God ten minutes of silence, even if nothing happens. By this you are in relationship with the

Lord, and you will, finally, receive strength and blessing. May it be so for all of us.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, on the mountaintop you were transfigured before you astonished disciples. In our days, Lord, come to us now... transform our doubts into faith, our questions into your answers, our uncertainties into your faithful walk, and our pieces into your reassuring peace. Help us to listen, Lord, and to hear. Amen.