SERMON FOR SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2009
SCRIPTURES: MARK 9:2-9; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6
"Transfiguration"

One of the things that I strongly suspected way back in my seminary days and have come to assume over many years of Biblical study and service as a church pastor is that nothing got into the final text of the Bible without a good reason. In other words, there is importance to every chapter, every verse, every book; even if I don't personally grasp fully what that reason is or why it is so important. With the full realization that assumptions can be dangerous, I think this one is pretty safe. The descriptions that we find in the book of Leviticus of how the hems of the curtains of the tabernacle should be woven are important. The numbers of years that arcane kings served in the Northern and Southern kingdoms of Israel that we find in the books of the Chronicles of the Kings are important. That really odd story from the gospel of Mark about a young man who follows Jesus and the disciples to the garden of Gethsemane (and I have my own theories about that one) is important. Everything that we find in the Bible has a purpose and a reason for being in the Bible.

My task as a local church pastor and lifelong student of the word of God is to find that importance, to discover that reason, to unearth that purpose, and then to offer it forth in ways that can enrich my own life and faith and the lives and faith of others as well. Now that doesn't necessarily make whole business easy, and I will be the first to admit that there is still lots and lots about the word of God that is still a mystery to me.

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus that we find in the gospels is one of those passages that I've always struggled with; it is a story that causes questions to just pour out of my heart and mind. in a nutshell, Jesus takes three disciples up to a high mountain and to a place that is secluded and separate from other people. As the disciples stand there, Jesus is transformed in some way and shines with a bright radiance. The figures of Elijah and Moses also appear out of nowhere standing beside Jesus and they begin to have a conversation with him. Peter tries to break into the action, saying basically, 'This is really cool; let's build a temple.' A cloud suddenly rolls in and a voice is heard announcing, 'This is my Son, my beloved; listen to him!' And then the whole business wraps up and everything reverts to the way was when they arrived; no shining Jesus, no Moses or Elijah, no overshadowing clouds, no voice from heaven, just four men and nice sunny day on the mountaintop. AND, to top it all off, Jesus tells his friends NOT

to say a word about their experience to anyone! (At least not until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead – which had to have been really confusing to disciples who had never heard about any form of resurrection.)

I read it, I study it, I digest it as best I can; and then the questions come streaming out: First and most importantly, "What in world was that all about?" Followed by all the others, "What does 'transfigured' mean? Are the descriptions of the transfigured Jesus literal or figurative? Are the descriptions the best thing that the disciples or the gospel writers could come up with as they tried to describe something that was so far outside their experience and understanding as to be indescribable? Why Moses and Elijah? (Yes, I know that they stood for the law and the prophets.) Why not Abraham and Isaiah, or Jonah and Jacob, or Deborah and Ruth? Why anyone at all? Why does Jesus take only three disciples; why not all twelve? Why not a whole crowd of people? Why not pull the whole thing off on the temple steps in the middle of Jerusalem? (Wouldn't that be a show?) Where did the cloud come from and why a cloud? Was it a thick cloud or just a light haze? Was it really necessary for the voice to tell the disciples to listen to Jesus? (You would think that after all they had been through to that point they would be pretty good listeners, impressed enough not to want to miss anything!) Finally, as amazing as the story is, what did the Gospel writers hope to achieve by including it in their writings? (Remember that the story can be found three out of four of the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke with very little variation. Matthew portrays the disciples as more frightened than Mark and says that the cloud was a "bright" cloud, and Luke notes that Jesus was praying when he was transfigured and that the disciples keep their tongues on their own without having to be told.

Now I <u>could</u> strive to answer every question that I have just asked and explore every facet of this story and this event – but we have made no provisions for lunch and I'm sure that many of you have plans for the afternoon. So I'm going to stick to some of the larger questions and leave the rest for a Bible Study somewhere off in the future.

Let's look then at the overreaching question, "What was this event about and why was it important that it be part of the canon of the Bible and the message of the gospels?" My take on the transfiguration is this; there must have been some historical event at its base, an event involving Jesus and Peter, James and John, an event that was so amazing that disciples felt it critical that they relate it to their friends. And the story that was related by the disciples was then deemed important enough that it was passed on orally through the early Christian Church. And

the oral account of the memories of the disciples was then important enough that the gospel writers were inclined to include it in their accounts of the life of Jesus. Did Jesus actually glow with an unearthly brightness? Did Moses and Elijah actually appear beside Jesus, and if they did was that appearance physical or some form of vision? Was there really a great cloud? Was there an actual voice or was the voice somewhere inside the heads of the disciples? Was the voice the voice of God? I don't know and I'm not even sure that the answers to those secondary questions are terribly important.

Another thing that I have learned over my years as a pastor and even before is that people have experiences from time to time that are not easily explained in any kind of physical or rational terms, and sometimes the experience can't be explained at all. I have often been asked, "Was what I experienced 'real'?" and I have learned that the only good answer to that question is "Absolutely!" The experience <u>was</u> real to that person. Maybe it wasn't explainable and possibly it wasn't even describable. Often the experience would not be recordable through the use of any of our modern recording techniques. Nevertheless it was very, very real. What I strive to do in those cases is to help the person get past the question of "reality" and on to the more important questions of "What did experience mean to me and what was its significance in my life?"

And what the disciples' experience in the transfiguration event meant to them was that Jesus their teacher, their friend, was more than a simple human being; that his very being was somehow infused with the divine nature of God, and that he was indeed God's beloved Son, <u>and</u> that it was critically important that they listen to him and believe in him. in fact we find that in time it was important enough that they would give their very lives for his memory and for the proclamation of his message.

So for me the transfiguration is one of those rare moments when the divinity of God broke into the reality or human existence, which means that God can and will break into the reality human existence at other times and in other places. Does that mean that I should expect someone in the congregation to suddenly start to glow with a supernatural bright whiteness or that a cloud might roll into the sanctuary without cause or warning and the voice of God will break in through our amplification system? Should I look for Moses or Elijah or Christ himself to appear magically before us today as we worship? Probably not. But what it <u>does</u> mean is that when someone comes to me with a story prefaced by the words, "You aren't going to believe this . . ." they might themselves be surprised just how much I will believe.

Friends, we worship a God who has the divine power to transfigure, to transcend, to transform the world in which we live, the experiences we have, and indeed our very beings. We celebrate the life Jesus Christ our Savior, a man whose disciples witnessed as something far more than a really nice guy. Let us then be always open and ready to receive the transfigured Christ whenever and however he might appear before us. Let us always be open and ready to welcome the divine power and nature of God wherever and however we might encounter it.

Amen.