

No Bleach!

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

February 11, 2024 – Morning Worship

Text: Mark 9:2-9

I was introduced to bleach by my mother when I was a little girl. In the house where I grew up, we did not have a laundry room. No, we had a laundry *area* in the basement. It was an area because my mom had quite a lot of equipment contained within a space in what I considered to be the creepiest part of the house. No, it was the second creepiest – the creepiest was the “root cellar” because it had a dirt floor. Even though it was filled floor to ceiling with delicious things my mother and grandmother had canned, I could not get past the dirt floor, or the mousetraps. But, I digress. Back to the laundry area.

My mother – and perhaps some of your moms too – elevated doing laundry each week to an art form. We had the obvious washer and dryer but also she insisted on keeping the old wringer washing machine as well because she felt that only a wringer washing machine could get linens and sheets to her level of clean. She also insisted on not one but two stationary tubs which could be filled with water from the taps as well as receiving the water as it drained from the washer following the rinse cycle. Yes, she recycled water from the washer. Usually rinse water only but she wasn't above reusing washing water if she would be using it to wash something like throw rugs. My mother was an early environmentalist even though she would have no idea what that means. She just lived it, having insisted on setting up her laundry area so she could recapture the hot water because she hated wasting anything, especially water. As I think about it now, I have absolutely no idea how all that worked. I do know that when they finally built their own house when they retired to Maine, she wanted to install the same set-up in that house (minus the wringer washer as my dad *refused* to move it) but it never worked that well.

Needless to say, when I was a little girl, I thought this set-up was simply fantastic. Of all the things my mom taught me growing up what she taught me about laundry is what I most remember. I think that's because she was serious about laundry. She was just like one of those housewives on those old commercials from the 60's. She was absolutely determined to have the whitest sheets in town and don't even get me started on what she went through with the dining room curtains. I loved the way it smelled down in that dank, dark basement when she was doing laundry because when the holding tank for the rinse water filled up, that most wonderful clean laundry smell filled the air. As the tub filled up, she would let me play in the warm water and, when she was washing white linens, she would add blueing solution because, she said, it made whites even whiter. This was a mystery to me because I could never figure out how blue made white whiter. But, so it goes. Interestingly, she rarely used bleach in the washer. Nope, if something had to be bleached, she would do that in the wash basin, scrubbing the offending stained cloth on a wooden scrub board. Yikes. I can still see her in my mind's eye, scrubbing away. And I can still remember thinking to myself back then, "no way am I ever doing that." And, I never have.

Our story this morning from Mark's Gospel is once again a familiar one and it's one I've preached on before, many times. But, for some reason, what leaped out to me as I pondered this text known as the story of the Transfiguration was this whole notion of Jesus' clothing becoming "dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." First of all, I was surprised to think of people in ancient Palestine having bleach. This made me wonder if "bleach" was a modern translation of a word that didn't mean bleach at all. The King James translates this same phrase this way: "And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow." Okay, this works. But it didn't

stop there continuing, “so as no fuller on earth can whiten them.” Great. Now what the heck is a fuller. Well, according to the *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, a fuller is “one who cleanses undressed cloth from oil and grease and renders it thick or compact by the application of pressure.”¹ My mom’s wringer washing machine! Who knew? A fuller can also be “one who thoroughly cleanses soiled garments.”² Okay, so my mother would easily have qualified as a fuller. Me? Well, maybe on a good day. A really good day.

I was tempted to go on a real hunt to see what other translations had to say about this particular turn of phrase but this did not seem like the best use of my time or yours. But, the phrase still remains curious. Let’s consider the entire scene. To put this in context, by the time this story unfolds, Jesus and the disciples had been on the road for quite a while, so long that Jesus was beginning to make allusions to what would be coming his way as their journey to Jerusalem continued. It’s at this point that he invites just a few of the disciples -- Peter, James, and John – to go up a “high mountain” with him. He seems to have been slightly ahead of them because as they reached the top, they witnessed this transformation that so changed his appearance that he appeared to be shining, his clothing now dazzling white. Then, they watched as Moses and Elijah – the two greatest prophets – appear and begin talking with Jesus. They were astonished of course. Peter, being Peter, called out to Jesus and offered to make some sort of dwelling places for the three of them, obviously assuming this conversation was going to go on for a while. I just love this next sentence: “He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.” In other words, in that moment, Jesus knew Peter and

¹ *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, ©1944 The Westminster Press, p. 189

² *Ibid.* p. 189.

presumably James and John as well, had no idea what was going on and they were understandably frightened. So he just ignored the offer of a space to stay with Moses and Elijah. Then, before anyone could say or do anything else, a cloud descended on everyone and a voice says, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!” Then, the cloud diminished and only Jesus and the three disciples remained.

We should note that what this voice, presumably God, says is remarkably similar to what God says as Jesus emerges from the water following his baptism. But there, God says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” So, this is an acknowledgement as Jesus begins his ministry that God is pleased that Jesus has stepped up to claim this role he was born for. Now, at this critical moment when he encounters the two greatest prophets of his own Jewish faith – Moses and Elijah – God now addresses his instructions to the three disciples. And what does he tell them to do? Listen to Jesus. Simple, straight forward. Listen to Jesus. Okay, but this is a pretty remarkable story so isn’t the message to us more than just listen to Jesus?

First of all, we need to understand the symbolism this story embodies. Jesus’ appearance is changed to “dazzling white,” notably without the benefit of bleach, to present him as a vindicated martyr, an image that appears elsewhere in scriptures several times. So Jesus was going to die but his death would somehow be vindicating to him and his mission from God. And this whole notion of having one’s physical appearance changed, again without the benefit of bleach, comes up again in the story of Moses being transfigured to a dazzling appearance after encountering God in the Tent of the Presence. We can therefore conclude that a direct encounter with God literally changes one’s appearance – even for Jesus, God’s own Son.

Second, we see in Moses and Elijah two larger than life persons in Jewish history. Moses is heralded as the founder of Israel, since it was Moses who led the Israelites to freedom from captivity in Egypt. Then, when they were on their journey to freedom in “the promised land,” it was Moses who presented them with God’s covenant embodied in the 10 Commandments. It’s noteworthy that this covenant was also delivered to Moses on a mountaintop, just like where this encounter is happening. Elijah’s is a slightly different story. He is understood as the “prophetic restorer” of Israel because it was Elijah who confronted the “priests of Baal” when the Israelites fell into worshipping this false God. He called down fire on them, killing them all, and securing the wrath of Queen Jezebel in the process. His inclusion in this mountaintop experience along with Moses recalls their combined “great actions of deliverance” which are meant to call to mind Jesus’ coming reckoning with the powerful forces of his world, both religious and political.³ Thus, as we consider this “transfiguration” of Jesus in the light of what is coming for him, we see that the transfiguration is meant to mark the beginning of his moving toward his final great act of sanctification and deliverance of God’s beloved people in his death on the cross.

Dear ones, this is why Transfiguration Sunday is always the last Sunday before Lent begins. It is an invitation to us to be aware of our own possibilities for change as we prepare to engage with this unique liturgical season. Put another way, as we think about Lent beginning this coming Wednesday, how is it that we – you and me – might be able to open up to the possibilities of change as Lent unfolds. What would you like to do to make the most of this season set aside for meditation, prayer, and reflection? Literally this is the time of year in the church when we are encouraged to focus intently on our

³ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ©2010 Oxford University Press, p. 1808

relationship with God but how do we do that? Read more? Study the Scriptures more intently? Pray more intentionally? Try something new to deepen your sense of God's presence in your life? And what might that be? Truly the possibilities are endless.

I should note that in year's past, I have gone to great lengths to create a Lenten discipline, usually gridded out on paper, that anyone could pick up and follow as a way to observe Lent. I didn't do that this year. Why? Well, because I would like to see folks – you -- take more ownership of what it is you feel called to do as you observe Lent. Honestly, I don't think many folks ever picked up those Lenten devotionals. I know how many copies I made each year, and I know how many were left when I cleaned up after Easter. Please know I am not "Lent shaming" you because that is not at all my point. No, what I am saying is I would like each of you to figure out something to do for and by yourself as a Lenten daily discipline or devotional. Now, nobody panic!!! This does not need to be some grand and glorious thing! You can do something simple like, take a copy of the church directory and call someone every day during Lent just to say hi. Or you can write a note to someone every day, someone from the church or an old friend or even a relative you've fallen out of touch with.

Another thing you can do is try to read a little Scripture every day. One suggestion I would have is to read the Gospel of John, a little bit each day, because it will be John's version of the resurrection that I preach about on Easter. Or, you could try to read your way through the Psalms. These are the hymns the ancient Israelites sang in worship and in everyday life. Some of them are odd and others are downright beautiful. Some you will love and others you will read them and think, "what the heck?" In any case, just reading them is an act of devotion, a setting aside of time for your relationship with God every day.

I'd also suggest that you consider journaling a bit every day. Write a letter to Jesus, telling him about your life and what you could use his help with. Or write a letter to your favorite Old Testament character (I can help you find one) and ask whatever questions their stories call to mind. Journaling is also a wonderful way to guide yourself in moments of joy or sorrow or confusion. It's also a fantastic way to explore your own emotions. A simple "examen" to do each day is to just try to identify one or two emotions you are feeling as you sit down to write along with the cause of those emotions. Note: It is possible to feel more than one emotion at a time!

And, of course, you can commit to coming to worship every Sunday, in person if possible, during Lent, starting with Ash Wednesday. I know this is obvious, yet I also know it's something so very basic that many of us tend to leapfrog right over it. Yet it matters. It really matters. No one can be a Christian alone. Our faith is just not intended to work that way, all due respect to the monks and nuns who choose to live as hermits. We can only learn what our faith means in practical terms by actually practicing it and the best place to do that is in a community of folks trying to do the same. That, dear ones, is the very definition of church.

In conclusion, I hope you will take the time to be dazzled along with Peter, James and John by the shining transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop. I hope it inspires you to look for your own dazzling experiences where you encounter shining moments of God's love, Jesus' guidance and healing and the Holy Spirit's enlivening presence in your life. Most of all I hope you will dare to believe that new possibilities are always being revealed by God to you, and to me, and to all of us. Why? Because with God all things are possible. Not only possible, but dazzling! No bleach involved! How amazing is that! Amen.

