

## ***Lifting the Veil***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
March 2, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion  
Text: Exodus 34:29-35

Good morning and welcome to the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday! This means two things in “church world.” One is that Lent begins on Wednesday and we’ll talk about that in a bit. Second is that since Lent starts this week, this Sunday must be Transfiguration Sunday. In doing my reading for this Sunday, though, I learned that this is not necessarily true. In the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, the Transfiguration is celebrated on August 6, whatever the day of the week it falls on. In other Christian traditions, the Transfiguration is celebrated at various times in the year. In our tradition along with our Presbyterian and Methodist friends, we fall under the category of “churches without established festal calendars<sup>1</sup>” meaning we do not have a calendar of set feast days. That means our tradition observes Transfiguration as the last Sunday of the Epiphany-tide season. In other words, this Sunday is when we mark the turn away from Jesus’ birth and life as he himself made the “turn to Jerusalem” where he knew his earthly life would end.

So, what is the Transfiguration anyway? Technically, the Transfiguration is the story about the time when Jesus took three of his disciples – Peter, James and John – with him as he went to the top of a mountain to pray. Jesus was often going off by himself on the tops of nearby mountains and hills but this time he decided to take these three with him. While Jesus was praying, the disciples noticed that his appearance changed. His face became radiant and his clothing became dazzling white. Then they noticed that Jesus was actually speaking with Moses and Elijah. According to Luke’s Gospel account, the three of them then “appeared in glory and were speaking of his [Jesus’] departure which he would accomplish at Jerusalem.” Peter, not understanding what was happening but always trying to be helpful, said to Jesus, “let us

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<sup>1</sup> [Feast of the Transfiguration - Wikipedia](#)

make three dwellings for you and for Moses and Elijah.” Just then, a cloud came and overshadowed them all as a voice said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.” Then the cloud departed and Jesus was alone.

This story appears only in the Synoptic Gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke. And it seems on the surface to be an odd story, disconnected from much of the others recounted in the Gospels. It raises all kinds of questions. Like why did Jesus only ask three disciples to come with him? And why those three in particular? What purpose does the story have? What is it trying to tell us? Obviously, like so many other stories in the Gospels, it tells us that Jesus is no regular human being. He has clearly been chosen by God for a uniquely important role in God’s plans for humankind. It once again identifies Jesus as God’s Son, emphasizing this with the appearance of Moses and Elijah as conversation partners with Jesus – an extraordinary event which the three chosen disciples witnessed firsthand. Interesting too is that in spite of this extraordinary encounter they had witnessed, they told no one about it. Why? Did they think no one would believe them? Did it just feel too sacred to even talk about? Note that Jesus didn’t tell them not to talk about it. They just didn’t talk about it, at least according to the text.

Another question we have as we consider this story is that we wonder why Moses and Elijah? Why those two when there are so many other significant people in the Old Testament? Why not Noah or Samuel or Saul or David? Why not Isaiah or Jeremiah? That, at least, would not have been a question the three disciples would have had when they suddenly saw Moses and Elijah having a conversation with Jesus. Elijah was the only one of all the prophets who did not die. Instead, he was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire on a whirlwind. He was also seen as the prophet whose return would herald the coming of the long awaited Messiah. Moses, on the other hand, is not someone we usually think of as a prophet but that is exactly what he was in all three Abrahamic religions. A prophet is someone who has direct contact

with God and speaks on behalf of God thus serving as a sort of intermediary between God and humans. Moses was definitely that. The book of Exodus is essentially the story of Moses as the foundational figure of what would become the Judaism we know today. As such he is also critical to both the Christian tradition and Islam. There are, of course, many amazing and miraculous stories about Moses starting with his birth in the days when Joseph's descendants had become slaves in Egypt, so numerous that the Egyptians became afraid about what would happen if their Hebrew slaves revolted and they ordered all male Hebrew babies to be killed. To save her son, Moses' mother put him in a basket and floated him down the river where he was pulled from the water by Pharaoh's daughter. The story goes on from there with Moses raised as a prince of Egypt, a position he left when he figured out who he really was. He was banished to the desert where he soon married and had children. (This story is spectacularly told in the 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston as Moses and Yule Brenner as Pharaoh. Charlton Heston was also the voice of God, a role he took a little too seriously at times. But I digress...)

Anyhow, eventually God tapped Moses to lead the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt. There were plagues and unleavened bread and rushing out at night with Pharaoh's army giving chase until they were drowned crossing the Red Sea which had miraculously parted so the Israelites could get across to safety. You know all this. I'm just trying to bring us all up to the point where today's Scripture text from Exodus is happening. This story takes place as Moses is coming back down the mountain after having to go back up the mountain to get two new stone tablets with the Ten Commandments because he had broken the first two in his rage over the whole Golden Calf incident. The text says: "Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God." The skin of his face shone because he had been

talking with God! And he didn't even realize it. But the people saw that the skin of his face was shining so they were afraid to come near him. But he talked with Aaron and the other leaders and they spoke with the people so that they were no longer afraid. As they came to him, Moses told them all the commandments God had given him on the mountain. And then, after he was finished speaking with the people, Moses put a veil on his face that he would only take off when he was speaking directly with God. His face had become dazzling because of his direct encounters with God. Moses had been transfigured, just like Jesus would later be.

So now we understand why Moses was there with Jesus up on that mountain along with Elijah. Moses had been the first to be transfigured. Elijah was the first to ascend to heaven without dying. But, looking at these two transfiguration stories, we notice one big difference right away. Jesus' dazzling appearance as he was chatting with Moses and Elijah must have faded away as he and the disciples came back down the mountain because the text says they never told anyone what had happened. If Jesus' appearance had become so very different on a permanent basis – as Moses' clearly had – then everyone would know something had happened. But no one mentioned it again. Not so with Moses. The text clearly says he took to wearing a veil when he was among the people, presumably because his appearance had become so changed, so dazzling, that it was just too unsettling for the already jittery Israelites to handle.

What's up with that? Was it because Moses had spent so much time in face to face conversation with God that his appearance was transformed – sort of like getting a sun burn because God's radiance was just too bright to escape unmarked? I'm sure that was the intent of the story – to add to the incredibly unique relationship Moses developed with God. More like good friends working together to achieve a common goal – the wellbeing of God's beloved people. Jesus, on the other hand, also had a unique relationship with God as God's Son, God in human form this time. God was not just friends with a human this time.

God somehow was that human in a way we can't really comprehend. Maybe Jesus was having a tough time understanding it too which is why he went up on that hillside to pray that day. There he was surprised as Moses and Elijah came to him to talk him through whatever was going to happen.

So why did I choose to focus on the story of Moses' Transfiguration instead of Jesus' this week? One is because I knew the story about Moses wearing the veil, but I had never made the connection to the Transfiguration of Jesus until this week as I was reading all the Lectionary passages as part of my devotionals each morning. It was one of those "well, duh" moments for me – see even a scholar can have those! Then, the more I considered the two stories side by side each gave me insight into the other. That was how I realized the difference between the two – that Moses' appearance had changed permanently and Jesus' had not. This is important because Moses' transfigured appearance gave him immediate authority since it was a visible testimony that Moses did have this very unique direct relationship with God, and because of that Moses accomplished incredible, super human things. Jesus, on the other hand, was not permanently transfigured. It was just a temporary affect of a conversation with two giants of the Hebrew faith come back to help him at his moment of greatest need, when he knew what he needed to do and was having difficulty doing it. Thus, the only sign of Jesus' encounters with Moses, Elijah and with God were on his heart. He had no veil to lift when he was among the people, teaching, healing and transforming lives. His authority came directly from God, a God with whom he too had a unique relationship but, in a way, entirely different from Moses. In some way the disciples, us, and I think Jesus' himself struggled to understand, Jesus was God so no visible sign was necessary for him to know that. He had only to follow God's call to action, every moment of every day. Jesus had no veil to obscure his view of what was happening all around him. He had no veil to block the sight of poverty and injustice he people endured every day under the so-called Roman peace of

brutal empire. In the end, his clarity of vision took him all the way to Rome and the empire's brutal response to his life's work. Dear friends, the Jesus whom we follow had no veil to block his view of the brutal world in which he lived. He saw everything and what he saw defined the rest of his life, his work, his friends and family and everything he did. He saw it all, and he responded, even unto death on the cross.

So, dear ones, what is it I hope you will take away from these two foundational stories of our faith? That, at least, is simple. In these days when our lives are being upended in ways we never thought possible, please lift any veils that are blocking what you see and hear. However, please do so carefully! Do NOT watch too much television news no matter the source. Place limits on yourself to keep from falling down the rabbit holes of doom that the media keep opening up in front of us. But, do pay attention to what is happening so you can decide how you wish to respond. There is much you can do to express your concerns in this volatile time and everyone who is physically and mentally able should do something. Even as simple a thing as praying intentionally for our country each day matters. So too is doing research to decide thoughtfully where you will spend your hard earned dollars in our consumer driven economy. Over time and with lots of others doing the same thing, this simple action of say – not buying anything through Amazon or not buying your gas from ExxonMobil (one of the largest financial supporters of Project 2025) – will be huge. Small things which can and will make a world of difference.

Dear ones, you also need to lift your veil so you can recognize in yourself when you need a break from everything and then take it. This is real. The anxiety, fear and grief are very, very real. Trust that and know when to invest in your own moments of joy, of peace, of intentionally doing something to bring joy and hope and laughter into your life front and center. I realized anew how important that is at our own Soup Supper this past Friday. What a lovely evening that was, so simple and yet so – transfiguring – in

its placement at the end of a bad news week. Good food, wonderful conversation, laughter – it was absolutely the best thing we could have done for ourselves and for our guests. This is something I think we need to think about as a way we can support our community as a whole during these frightening times. But we can think about that more in our board and committee structures as well as brainstorming other ways we can continue to be an oasis of hope and light in our community. Such will be an important task for our Lenten considerations this year.

Lifting the veil so we can see what God would have us see in the world around us. Lifting the veil so we can dare to imagine what God might be asking us to do, as individuals and as a congregation, in response. This will be our task this Lenten season as we travel along with Jesus from the mountaintop of the Transfiguration to the cross and the empty tomb of Jerusalem. I hope you'll join us as always but especially this year when the stakes for our country and our own lives are so high. Fear and anxiety are never a good thing since we can't respond thoughtfully when we are so very upset. That's why gathering together in church, like we are doing right now, is the very best antidote to that tactic of fear-mongering. Lifting the veil to see and respond together is best done together, in the midst of a community of people doing the same. Here we are, reminding each other that all things are possible with God. Alleluia! Amen.