**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC 2/22/15**

**101 Pondfield Road West Bronxville, NY 10708**

***It Figures***

**A Sermon about the Transfiguration by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**WELCOME**

Good morning and welcome to worship at West Center Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, where this morning we are celebrating the Transfiguration of our Lord. Transfiguration Sunday was actually last Sunday, when we cancelled worship due to the strong winds and predicted snow. So here we are, together again. Thank you for coming out today, after the terribly cold week and the iffy weather this weekend. Welcome to the heavenly warmth of our West Center Church worship and fellowship.

**OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS** 2 Kings 2:1-12

Today’s Old Testament reading tells the story of the prophet Elijah being carried in a whirlwind up to God. Elijah’s disciple and prophetic heir, Elisha, devotedly follows Elijah on earth. Nine hundred years later Elijah meets Moses and Jesus on a mountaintop, where Jesus is transfigured.

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Mark 9:2-9

This is Mark’s story of the Transfiguration, our Lord’s meeting Moses and Elijah on a mountaintop, where Jesus’ clothing, and in the Gospel of Matthew, the face of Jesus, become dazzling white, shining like the sun.

Let’s take a look at our bulletin cover for this morning, which illustrates the Transfiguration with the characters in modern dress. Jesus is at the top. His face and clothes are shining; he is transfigured. Moses, to our right, holds a tablet with the word “Ascension” inscribed on it, in the manner of the Ten Commandments. Moses supports Jesus with his other hand. Elijah, to our left, points to Jesus, with one hand, while the other hand holds a banner predicting Jesus’ resurrection. Partway down the mountain the three disciples sleep. We can see that Peter may be dreaming of the three dwellings that he had suggested they build for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Below on the road, the other disciples look at us as if to say that something unusual is happening. They have seen the light and the figures on the mountaintop, but they don’t know what is going on.

**SERMON**

It figures. It figures that Jesus would be transfigured, that he would be changed, meeting Elijah and Moses on a mountaintop. Moses and Elijah are used to mountaintop experiences. Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai before leading his people to the Promised Land. The appearance of Moses on the mountain, shows that Jesus is the heir to the Mosaic tradition, that Jesus will become as great a leader as Moses. It figures.

It is on a mountain that Elijah hears “the still small voice of God” speaking to him. Elijah didn’t respond, “You talkin’ to me?” Elijah knew it was God. After Elijah’s death, his anticipated return will be the harbinger of the long-awaited Messiah. And there is Elijah, on the mountaintop with Jesus. No more waiting. It figures.

It also figures that when coming down the mountain, Jesus orders Peter, James and John not to tell anyone what they had seen until after his Resurrection. After the Resurrection is when the story of the Transfiguration will be needed; that’s when the story will do the most good, when the followers of Jesus will be afraid and wondering what will happen to them. Through the story of the Transfiguration, Jesus’ followers will know that Jesus’ family tree includes Moses and Elijah, as well as Mary and Joseph. The followers of Jesus will know that God is with them, that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus wants people to believe and trust in the Good News of God’s love, not because of super-natural events but because we discover God’s love in our own hearts. So it figures that Jesus would not make a big deal of his Transfiguration.

And by and large in the United Church of Christ, we don’t make a big deal about the Transfiguration either. While you will find Roman Catholic Churches named for the Holy Transfiguration and Episcopal Churches of the Transfiguration, you will be unlikely to find Transfiguration United Church of Christ, at least in the churches that come from the Congregational branch of the UCC. You might find a Transfiguration United Church of Christ in the Evangelical and Reformed branch of the UCC, but when I did a Google search of “Transfiguration United Church of Christ,” no churches appeared with that name. So there being a “Transfiguration UCC” is unlikely.

But although in the United Church of Christ we don’t make a big deal of the Transfiguration, the Transfiguration is important to us theologically for at least three reasons.

First, the Transfiguration puts Jesus in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. Jesus is not just another rabbi, not a prophet, nor a healer. Jesus is not Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah. The appearance of Moses and especially Elijah at Transfiguration shows that Jesus is the Messiah that the Old Testament foretells.

Secondly, that Jesus is the Messiah is underscored by the voice from the cloud at the Transfiguration, the voice of God saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.” Jesus is not a worldly king, a Second David, as some prophesies foretold. Jesus is a son, the Son of God, who will fulfill the Suffering Servant prophesies of Isaiah, as in Isaiah 53:4, “Surely he has born our griefs and carried our sorrows.”

Of the six men in the Transfiguration story, Christians believe that Jesus is special, that Jesus is unique. For Jesus has come to us with the Good News of God’s love, transcending God’s Law.

We are to listen to what Jesus says. We are to watch what Jesus does. We are to follow Jesus, for he is God’s Son, the Beloved. Jesus is our Lord. He is transfigured.

And third, the story of the Transfiguration is important for us because the Transfiguration is not only about light. It’s true that he story of the Transfiguration seems to focus on the dazzling white of Jesus’ clothes in the Gospel of Mark: “And his clothes became dazzling white.” And the Gospel of Matthew states: “(Jesus’) face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.” (Matthew 17:2)

And while the Transfiguration story seems to focus on the bright light of Jesus’ clothing and his countenance, it is important to note that not everything on the mountain is merry and bright. For eventually a cloud overshadows the mountain, a cloud overshadows the mountain, when the voice of God appears saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.”

The third and crucial point of the Transfiguration story is about the overshadowing, about the cloud from which the voice of God emanates. Paradoxically, the Transfiguration shows that God is not only a God of light, a God of radiance, a God of luminescence.

God is also present in darkness. God is present in our darkness.

God is present in our clouds.

God is present in our problems,

God is present in our despair.

And God is not only present in our darkness. God speaks to us through the darkness, saying, “Jesus is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.”

The Prologue to the Gospel of John reinforces that God is ever-present: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:5)

Here’s a story about light shining in darkness. It’scalled “From Darkness into Light.”

 *From Darkness into Light*

*In October 2010, one billion people watched as the miraculous rescue of 33 miners trapped in a Chilean mine played out on television. CBN News interviewed miner Jose Henriquez, the man some called "The Pastor," who helped his companions go from darkness into the light. The media gave him the title of "The Pastor," or "Spiritual Guide," but Henriquez prefers to be called simply Don Jose.*

*"I am not a pastor or a spiritual guide as they have called me," Henriquez said. "So Don Jose fits me better. My co-workers know me as such and that's what they would call me."*

*He's just over 6 feet tall, and at 54 years of age has a solid build. He is a man whose life has been forged in the mines of Chile, where he has worked for 33 years. For the same 33 years, he has been married to his wife Hetiz. Thirty-three is also the number of miners who were trapped in the San Jose mine.*

*The 33 miners needed more than food and physical strength to survive 2,000 feet underground during those two months. "I believe that the key to all this was in the Word of God, in having believed God," Henriquez added. "That's why I say to the whole world that the Lord wants them to believe in Him, to believe in His Word".*

*Henriquez is a profoundly spiritual person. His faith in God was key in helping his companions to hold on to hope. Jose Gonzalez, Henriquez's pastor said, "That spirituality served him well, that knowledge of the Word, having worked with the Word, because he preached in the church here.*

*Preaching in the church helped Henriques because in the mine he did not have the Bible to read. He had to draw the Word out from within his heart, to be able to share it with his companions".*

*The Christian miner led devotions twice a day, crying out to God with the other miners. Thanks to his efforts, some of the miners turned their lives over to Jesus.*

*"On the Sunday before we were rescued, I called for a pastor to come, because I am not a pastor," Henqiruez said. "So I told my brother in a letter, 'Bring a pastor that you consider, and that God has confirmed, is a real pastor, to come and lead the prayer of salvation.'” And his brother brought a pastor. And around 20 miners said, 'Yes, they believed in the Lord.'"*

*After being rescued, Henriquez was the first of the 33 men to go back into the mine. He wanted to return to thank God for getting him out of the depths of the earth alive.*

*Henríquez was welcomed in his hometown of Talca as a real hero. But he said, "The true hero is Jesus Christ.” "He is the only hero that should be mentioned. Apart from whatever man may have done both inside and outside that mine, Jesus is the one who deserves the honor and the glory."*

*Henríquez is a miner by nature, but he knows now that he has a responsibility to testify about how God used him to bring his companions out of darkness into the light.*

May the light of the Transfiguration pierce our darkness as well, bringing us into the light, by revealing the love of God through the Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Friend.

Amen.