

**GOD'S RECLAIMING ACTS: COUSINS AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE  
GENESIS 17:1-9, 15-22; MARK 9:2-9  
FEBRUARY 26, 2006  
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Each year Transfiguration Sunday precedes the journey of Lent, the journey to the cross. On Transfiguration Sunday from the top of a mountain, we see with the disciples, into God's future when Jesus the man becomes Christ the Savior.

Just before Jesus begins his painful path to the cross we catch this glimpse of him high and lifted up, not on a cross, but as God's victorious son and savior.

The story drips with symbolism. The mountain where the transfiguration occurs recalls the giving of the commandments on Mt. Sinai; Jesus' appearance white as snow suggests a light of divine origin; the appearance of Moses and Elijah connects Jesus with two of Israel's greatest leaders. And the cloud recalls the divine presence in the cloud of the exodus leading the people from Pharaoh's bondage to God's freedom.

Here in the dead of winter, weeks before Easter Sunday, we catch this vision of Jesus as Christ, literally Jesus the anointed one – as the voice from heaven says today and at Jesus' baptism "My son with whom I am well pleased."

What the story tells us is this: when we find ourselves in the dead of some winter or wilderness God often provides visions of a new day. A vision that keeps our hopes high and legs strong as we journey through the present into God's dream for the future.

Today's second lesson is the story of the covenant God makes with Abraham and Sarah. This is the lesson our children are studying in their Church School classes. It has a particular resonance with the story of the Transfiguration.

When God makes this covenant, Abraham and Sarah are not even known as Abraham and Sarah – they are Abram and Sarai – the primitive tribal names of their old life before they become new people by making a covenant and commitment with Yahweh.

As at other times of covenant making – such as baptism or the taking of religious vows or the vows of marriage – the recipient of the covenant receives a new name. Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah.

The connection with the Transfiguration is this: just as Jesus the man becomes Christ the Savior in the mountaintop vision, so the childless couple Abram and Sarai become in God's covenant Abraham and Sarah, promised mother and father of a great nation.

It hasn't happened yet in either case, but in the eyes of God and the vision of the biblical writers these two stories look forward to a new day for the human family.

Here in the dead of winter I would like for us to consider what good news these two stories might be offering us on New Member Sunday at the edge of Lent. In fact, I believe that life puts us in such dead of winter moments when all we have is the promise of our faith and vision of God to go on.

Let me share with you what I hear the stories saying by telling you about this past week. Betsy Mitchell and I returned yesterday from our fourth visit in five years to Westminster members who winter or live in Florida. Many of these folks are among our oldest members.

The trip is an annual tradition that goes back to Dr. Butzer in the 1950s. I can tell you that life goes on for our members wherever they live – in warm climates or cold. Alzheimers, shingles, broken legs, hip replacements, worries and concerns about the struggles of children and grandchildren occupy their prayers.

If not the dead of winter's cold, our snow birds in Florida often find themselves stuck in some wilderness of crisis or concern.

In addition to two dinners that Betsy arranged, one on the west coast and one on the east coast – hosted by devoted members in their homes – I had the opportunity to visit each day one-on-one with those who were in the greatest need.

But the purpose of our trip was not only congregational care and fellowship. It was to share with them what I believe is God's vision of a transfigured Westminster.

At both of our dinner gatherings I talked with our friends about three things: first, fiscal responsibility and our first balanced congregational budget in memory; second, the results of a two year study that has identified urgent needed improvements and repairs to our buildings and campus; and third, our budding Westminster Economic Development Initiative and its goals for new Habitat homes on Ferguson Ave., mentoring small business entrepreneurs and ongoing tutoring in our ENERGY program – homes, jobs and education for a stronger West Side.

I am happy to report that all of those who attended the dinners and heard the presentation were enthusiastic and interested in each of these important areas of our church life.

But I was quick to tell them that other than our ENERGY tutoring program and the three Habitat houses we are committed to working on this summer, the other things I talked about had yet to be accomplished.

Fiscal responsibility does not happen because a church balances a budget. It happens when officers and staff steward financial resources but also when the members of the church conduct their personal giving with passion and priority. Preserving this historic landmark of a building does not happen by just keeping it clean and functional but when we address long deferred maintenance and needed improvements. And having a major impact on the quality of life in a West Side community will not happen with the present level of volunteers and program but when hundreds of members of this church take a piece of the jobs, homes, education vision.

Back to the biblical stories. You could say that the transfiguration of Jesus atop the mountain that day was the wishful thinking of the Gospel writer and I am sure many did.

You could say that God's promise to make of Abraham and Sarah the progenitors of a great nation that would be a blessing to all the nations was the silly dream of an old couple and I am sure many did.

And you could say that the vision of this congregation helping to bring about the transformation of a key neighborhood in our city; the restoration of a physical plant that honors the gift of our ancestors who built it and the management of our personal resources in ways that create budget surpluses and abundance rather than deficits is a star too high to shoot for.

And perhaps some feel that way today.

When the blinding light of the transfiguration receded, Jesus and his disciples had to go back down the mountain and begin the difficult journey to the holy city and to his death and resurrection;

after God summoned Abraham and Sarah, changed their names and promised them descendants that numbered more than the stars they had to pick up their tent, shepherd their livestock and make their way to that promised land.

So also the elected leaders of this congregation and you and I the members of this body of Christ and all of us together cannot dwell forever with only a vision of where God is leading us. The journey of Lent and much soul-searching await us.

Yet, on this Sunday, in the dead of winter, when the disciples caught a glimpse of Jesus in his glory; and when our boys and girls learn the story of Abraham and Sarah and the nation they would bring about, what I hear the Holy Spirit saying to us is this:

I am calling you, Westminster, to give birth to a new way of life in your ministry together and in my mission to the city. It will mean changing the status quo that keeps you comfortable but limited. It will require risk and trust and perseverance. You will become impatient and frustrated and ask yourself if it can be done.

But this is what I pledge to you: through you the Transfigured Christ will live and I will make children to Abraham and Sarah in your midst and on Buffalo's West Side as far as the eye can see. Amen.