

(Carolyn Hoekstra is the pianist for the day)

Welcome/Announcements/Land Acknowledgement **Dennis Sutherland** (worship elder)

**As we come to worship in Jesus' name we acknowledge with gratitude and respect the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather.**

Celebrations / Joys & Concerns

*God's blessing on you. God's blessing on you. God's blessing, dear friends. God's blessing on you.*

Call to Worship

The church lives to praise God.

**We have no higher calling than to offer the worship that belongs to God day by day, Sunday by Sunday.**

Through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments, in praise, prayer, teaching and fellowship, God sustains the life of the church.

**We worship God, offering ourselves in the service of Christ, rejoicing in the Holy Spirit**

□ *There is room for all*

*pdf attached*

□ Gathering Prayer and Words of Hope (Assurance of Forgiveness)

God of grace and God of glory, you reveal your presence to the world in radiant glory and gentle whispers, on mountain tops and lowly plains, in classrooms and hospital beds, in homes and churches, in the silence of nature and the sounds of cities. Yours is the presence that pushes past our fears, yours is the touch that transforms our doubts. We come before you to celebrate your goodness, to focus on your light, offer you all praise, honour and thanksgiving, for you are our God and we are your people, now and always. God of mercy and forgiveness, facing the light of your goodness, we confess all that keeps us from sharing that goodness. We are distracted by the desire to have more than we need. We focus on our own disappointments rather than trust the future you create. We feel discouraged by the pandemic and fail to claim the hope you hold out to us in Christ. Transfigure us by your grace, and shape us into disciples who follow Christ's leading each day. Amen. Do not be afraid. God's forgiveness shines into the world. The morning star rises in our hearts and we are made new. Know that you are forgiven and forgive one another in Christ's name.

□ *God of mercy, God of grace*

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□ Prayer for Understanding led by the lay reader (**Amanda McAlpine**)

God of all wisdom and truth, we seek your guidance as we hear the Scriptures read and interpreted today. Send your Holy Spirit to open our minds and hearts, to give us fresh understanding and a renewed commitment to follow your Word.  
Amen

### Scripture

#### **Exodus 34:29-35 (OT 81)**

<sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. <sup>31</sup> But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. <sup>32</sup> Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. <sup>33</sup> When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face, <sup>34</sup> but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off until he came out, and when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, <sup>35</sup> the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining, and Moses would put the veil on his face again until he went in to speak with him.

#### **Luke 9:28-36 (NT 69 -70)**

<sup>28</sup> Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. <sup>29</sup> And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. <sup>30</sup> Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. <sup>31</sup> They appeared in glory and were speaking about his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem. <sup>32</sup> Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but as they awoke they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. <sup>33</sup> Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah," not realizing what he was saying. <sup>34</sup> While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. <sup>35</sup> Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen;<sup>[b]</sup> listen to him!" <sup>36</sup> When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

### Message

The story of the Transfiguration – we read it this morning - people have been trying to figure out **the meaning** of this story for two thousand years. Without, in my opinion, *very much luck*. It's this wonderful tale of a *mystical encounter*, not only between God

and Jesus, but also between those *at the center* of the story, and those who are present *and watch* what happens. Those **at the center** are Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Those **who watch** are the disciples - Peter, James and John. *And then, of course, there are all of us watching all of them*, as we read the story, and *all of us* who are watching, are trying to figure out - *what's going on?* What does all of this mean? Because that's what we like to do with stories from the Bible, we try to *boil the story down* to its *central meaning*. What is *the message* of this story? What is it *telling us*? This way of reading the Bible, seems to be the dominant approach to scripture. Give us a story about Jesus, or a parable, and we put on our *thinking caps*, doing our best to decipher the symbols, read between the lines, and come up with the *encoded message*, Jesus or Luke or God has hidden in the passage for us to find. The idea seems to be, the story itself is chiefly a *suitcase* for conveying the meaning inside of it. Discern the content of the story, pull out the kernel of truth - and it's **mission accomplished!** So, what do Biblical scholars and theologians make of today's Gospel reading – *the story of the transfiguration*?

Let me offer you one common interpretation. There are three main characters at the heart of this story. You have Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Moses, they say, is there representing the Law – remember he's the one who received the Ten Commandments from God. Elijah is there representing the prophets – the ones who spoke for God throughout the Old Testament. And then there's Jesus, *well, Jesus is the Messiah!* In the story, Jesus is singled out by God who declares him to be "*my Son, the Beloved*." So, it's now clear what the story means: God is declaring the Gospel message of Jesus to be *superior* to the law and the prophets, the message of Jesus *transcends* and replaces the old message. "*Listen to him*," says the voice of God from the clouds. And then, some interpreters of scripture have also added, "And you see, the purpose of such *mountaintop experiences* is to strengthen us for *the climb* back down into the valley of the shadow of death, where our real work remains to be done." **Case closed!** We have now *extracted* the kernels of truth from this story. Now, for all I know, those are exactly the meanings that Jesus or Luke or God meant for us to get from the story ... but I do want to draw it to your attention, that this passage of scripture, *itself*, **does not** say any of those things. Instead, it describes something so beyond ordinary human experience, most of us are perfectly content to watch it from *two thousand years away!*

The story starts with a long climb up a winding mountain path in the fading light of day, hunting for a *good place to pray*. You find a place like. You sit down. You're here to pray, so you get on with it. Jesus apparently likes to pray for *a long time*, so eventually Peter, James and John are overcome by sleep ... **until** the darkness is broken by a light shining so brightly, you feel its presence right through your closed eyelids. You know something spooky is happening - this light is just **too bright!** One part of your brain tells you to open your eyes and see what's going on and the other part of your brain is just plain terrified, telling you, "Keep em closed, **keep em closed!**" But, then you look, and there he is, *there's Jesus*, someone you thought you knew *really well*, standing there *pulsing with light*, light leaking out of his very skin. His face is like a

blazing fire, his clothes are dazzling white. Then, as if that isn't enough, there are two other people with Jesus. All of them standing in that same dazzling light. Who are they? Can't be Moses? Elijah? **Dead men come back to life?** The brilliant glory of God lighting up the night sky! Now wait, they're leaving, Peter says something, "tents," he's saying. We need tents! Someone tell him, "**We don't need tents!**" Now there's a cloud coming in fast, it's way more than weather, a terrifying cloud that's somehow alive! It smells, *it smells*, like a lightning strike! And then a voice from the cloud speaks. Chills run up and down your spine, the hair lifts up on the nape of your neck, fear so fast and primitive, you're like a bristling dog! **What's the voice saying?** Not "listen to *me*" but "listen to *him*." The Son, the Beloved, *Jesus*. But listen to *what*? Jesus isn't saying anything, **he's shining!** Or at least he was. Now he's not, now it's over, now what? If anything even *remotely* that strange has ever happened to you, then you know why Peter, James and John are relieved when Jesus says to them, "*Keep this to yourself boys*" - supernatural light, famous people coming back from the dead, and God talking to you from inside a cloud.

Start talking about those sorts of things, and someone's going to give you the name of a good psychiatrist. So let's just forget about all those disturbing details and *boil it all down* to one "*bite sized*" nugget of meaning and truth. Just say the thing about, Jesus surpassing the law and the prophets, poke a little fun at the disciple Peter for wanting to set up some tents on the mountain top, *bury the rest of it*. It might have been God, then, again, it might have been that big bowl of spicy curry you ate last night.

We don't much like to talk about **direct** experiences of God, especially as good Presbyterians. We prefer to understand "*the new life in Christ*," as simply setting aside your old way of understanding and interpreting life and the universe, in favour of a *new and improved* way of understanding life and the universe, which includes a theoretical, arms-length, respectable acceptance of *the probability* of the existence of a God who is revealed to us by a tame and domesticated Jesus of Nazareth. And then, you will read the Bible according to accepted norms, and the Bible will give you all the answers to the important questions, because when you read it, you or someone who knows more about the Bible than you, will tell you what it *all means*. You have your Christian decoder ring, **now use it!** But what if, *what if*, the point is not to *decode* the cloud, *but to enter into it*? What if the whole Bible is less a book of simple moral lessons and certainties, than it is a book of encounters, experiences, in which a staggeringly long parade of people run into God, into each other, and into *life, and are never the same again*?

The Bible is a document, both mystifying and confusing, filled with a bewildering set of stories, parables and eternal truths, **what don't you run into in the Bible?** Not just terrifying clouds and booming voices from above, but also crazy relatives, persistent infertility, armed enemies, and deep depression, along with life-saving strangers, miraculous children, food in the wilderness, and *infinite love*. And when the characters

in the Bible encounter all these different experiences, they cannot simply be categorized into good *and bad*; **right and wrong**; **true and false**. Whether such biblical encounters come *disguised* as "good" or "bad," they have a way of *rearranging* and *reordering* the lives of those biblical characters, so that there is more room in their lives for the profound mystery of God. Sometimes the movement involves setting out on a journey, sometimes it means changing their perspective on what they understand to be true, and why they understand it to be true, sometimes it means breaking down the barriers of prejudice and hatred, opening us up to the almost invisible movement of one heart towards another.

**Certainty** about life's meaning and purpose, settled notions of who's who and what's what. foregone conclusions about where you're going in your life and why. Those things can shift pretty dramatically inside the *cloud of unknowing*, like on the Mount of Transfiguration, where faith has more to do with *being present* to the experience of God, than with a static and stubborn certainty about *what it all means*. Of course, there's no way to be sure, all these things happen in the midst of the confusion and muddle of life. It's always obscured in a cloud of unknowing, the shining cloud that is the sure sign of God's presence. What the Bible calls "the *glory* of God."

In the Book of Exodus, Moses climbs Mount Sinai to receive the tablets of the law, and the whole top of the mountain is shrouded in divine cloud cover for six days. In I Kings, Solomon dedicates the Temple in Jerusalem ... and a dense cloud fills up the sanctuary so the gathered priests can't even see what they were supposed to be doing. When Ezekiel has his vision of the four living creatures, he sees them in the middle of "a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth!" That's what *God's glory* looks like, apparently, a big bright cloud, dark and dazzling at the same time!

For those of you who keep track of the Church calendar, you know this is the *swing Sunday* between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent. Today is the day when we turn away from the *twinkling stars* of Christmas ... and we enter the deep wilderness of Lent. As gloomy as that may sound, *it is very good news*. Most of us are so distracted by our gadgets, so busy with our work, so addicted to our pleasures, and so resistant to the profound mysteries and deep experiences of God and life, that a nice long spell in the wilderness, might just be what we all need. Now, of course no one can make you venture out into that wilderness. **But**, if you've been looking for some excuse to head over to your own mountaintop and pray, *this is it!* If you've been looking for some way to trade in your old certainties, for new movement and growth in your life, *look no further!*

This is our chance to enter *the cloud of unknowing*, listening for whatever it is, *God has to say to you*. This is our chance to encounter God's *contagious glory*, so a little of that dazzling and shining light might rub off on you, and on me. Today we heard a story we can take with us when we go on that quest ourselves. It tells you no one has to go up

the mountain alone. It tells you sometimes things get *really, really scary*, before they get *holy, holy*. And above all, it tells you there is someone standing in the center of the cloud *with you*, shining so brightly, you may never be able to wrap your mind around him, but who is worth listening to all the same, because he is God's beloved, and you are his, and whatever comes next, will be joyful and surprising and far, far beyond the human imagination to predict or comprehend!

*□ We have come at Christ's own bidding*

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□ Offering and Prayer

God has been revealed in glory for the healing of the world. We have glimpsed that healing in the hope we share in Christ, even in these challenging times. Let us present our gifts to God so that this healing and hope will continue to spread in the world God loves.

*□ Praise God from whom all blessings flow*

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Gracious God, you have given us life and blessed us in Christ with new life. Bless the gifts we offer today, and bless our lives, so that others may see his grace at work in us and what we offer the world in Jesus' name. Amen.

Celebrating Our Common Faith (The Apostles' Creed 539)

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen

Gathering at the Lord's Table (invitation)

*□ All who hunger, gather gladly*

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□ Celebrating Together with Thanksgiving

God be with you.

**And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them up to God.**

Let us give thanks to the Triune God.

**It is good to give God thanks and praise.**

It is our greatest calling and our greatest joy to give you thanks and praise, O Lord, our God, creator and sustainer of heaven and earth. You spoke, and at your word all things took shape and came into being: the sun and moon and stars, the sky and earth and waters, and all they contain. At your instruction, your Spirit swept over creation, bringing order out of chaos and life out of the formless void. From the elements of the earth you created us as unique and distinct people but all in your holy image. You breathed life into us and called us to love and serve you and to live with you and one another in covenant and community. But we turn away from you and we have tried to live apart from you and one another; but, you never turn from us. Through the prophets you call us back to you and to your ways. In the fullness of time, you sent your son, the Way, Truth, and Life, who was born of a mother's flesh to reveal the full extent of your grace and love. Again and again you welcome us and receive us with the open and welcoming arms of a loving father. Therefore we praise you, as we lift up our hearts in joyful praise:

*□ 829 Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest, hosanna in the highest.*

You are holy, O God of majesty, and blessed is Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. At his baptism by John, your Spirit came with gentle wings, settling on him your blessing. In the wilderness of temptation, your Spirit stood by with power. In his life and ministry, your Spirit led him to serve the poor, proclaim freedom from sin's bondage, open eyes with faith's sight, and befriend the friendless and the outcast. In all he did and said, he announced the coming of your saving might. By his death on the cross and rising from the tomb, he broke the power of death, and led the way to eternal life. Therefore, in remembrance of your mighty acts in Jesus Christ, we take this bread and this cup and give you praise and thanksgiving as we proclaim the mystery of faith:

*□ 523 Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.*

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these your gifts of bread and wine, that the bread we break and the cup we bless may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ. By the fire of your Spirit, O God, forge us into one church, many and different people, together in Christ's embrace. Set our hearts aflame with a love for the truth and the desire to do your will, that our witness to Christ may burn brightly in lives of joyful discipleship. Amen. As the Lord Jesus took bread, I take these elements of bread and wine to be set apart from all common uses to this holy use and mystery. On the night Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said: THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH IS FOR YOU; DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME. In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying: THIS CUP IS THE NEW COVENANT IN MY BLOOD; DO THIS WHENEVER YOU DRINK IT, IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME. The gifts of God for the people of God

### Sharing Bread and Cup

*Please come forward to receive Holy Communion – everyone is welcome at this table. If you are unable to come to the front, please signal an elder who will come and serve you. We use gluten and dairy-free bread. You may choose either juice or wine.*

### □ Prayer after Communion

Gracious God, may we who have received this sacrament live in the unity of your Holy Spirit, that we may show forth your gifts to all the world. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ...

□ *Our Father in heaven (The Lord's Prayer – no repeats)*      **469**

### Blessing

Christ Jesus, has revealed God to us through revolutionary love. May we go into the world to live out that love. And now may the grace and love of God – Creator, Redeemer and Friend – be with you all, this day and always. Amen

□ *Go now in peace*

*pdf attached*