"Extreme Makeover, Church Edition"
Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9
March 2, 2014
Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut
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Most of us are familiar with the "Extreme Makeover" series of reality television. Extreme Makeover involves an exhaustive process of personal physical transformation, including surgery, exercise, nutrition, cosmetic and clothing makeovers. "Extreme Makeover – Home Edition" does the same for someone's house, usually in response to a very touching story.

The Christian life is much the same. God continues to make us over in the divine image. In these readings, we encounter the powerful and terrifying, electrifying and inspiring, image of a mighty God. This God does not put on fireworks for fireworks' sake but encounters us to give us an exciting vision of life lived in the image of God.

In Exodus, God took Moses and the elders of Israel up on Mount Sinai. They were as we might have been: afraid at the awful and terrifying presence of the Living God who brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. Since no one could gaze upon the glory of God—the "shekinah" of God—and live, we might forgive them for their apprehension. The people even asked Moses to encounter God on their behalf so they would not be put at risk.

In the end, Moses encountered God alone in the fiery, living cloud. For seven chapters, God gives Moses the blueprint for the extreme makeover that would make this stubborn and stiff-necked people into what God told Abraham they would become: a people blessed by God in order to be a blessing.

Fast forward to Matthew's Gospel: another mountaintop, another bright and fiery cloud. Four men are there. One is an itinerant Jewish preacher named Jesus of Nazareth. By now he's made quite a stir. Those devoted to him see him as prophet and perhaps more. The other three are his devoted followers Peter, James and John.

Suddenly, amidst light and fire as Moses had been, Jesus is transfigured. Matthew stammers out a description: Jesus' face shining like the sun, his clothes as bright and white as they could possibly be. But why are Moses and Elijah there? Moses, the greatest lawgiver and Elijah, the greatest prophet, become the meeting where, as we just sang "the Lord holds converse high and sweet" and "the law and prophets there have place, two chosen witnesses of grace." Pretty awesome, eh?

So what do the disciples do with "awesome?" Whether James and John are just smart enough to keep their mouth closed or Peter beats them to the punch, we'll never know. But in the midst of the celestial sound and light show, Peter offers to put up a tent. All right, three tents. Yes, the text said "dwellings" but the Greek is *skene* (skay-nay), literally a tent or a cloth hut.   Let's just take *awesome* and make it *ho-hum*.

I want to say a bit more about this because, to be honest, I'm Peter. I like working with my hands. Not that you ever want me doing finish carpentry, but I've built shelves and treehouses and playhouses. I know how to run a table saw and a circular saw and a chain saw. I finished a basement and built a non-loadbearing wall. When we renovated our home last summer, Carol and I did most of the painting; and what we did stacks up pretty well against what the pros did. And, no, I don't hire out. But again, with the exception of the painting, none of it is pretty but all of it is functional.

And sometimes, Mr. Wesley's practical Christianity appeals to me because it is functional. So when I am in the presence of the mysterious; when God decides to remain anonymous and I call it a coincidence; when people pray and prayer is answered in glory and power; I am sometimes confounded. Not because I don't believe, but because the goodness of it all seems so overwhelming. And when it happens to me I feel so undeserving. As this same Peter said on another occasion in the presence of God's power, "Lord, depart from me for I am a sinful man." **(Luke 5:8)**

Yet Peter wasn't as far off as we think. When he said, "Let us build three *skenes*," the word is translated *tabernacle* in the King James Version. Those who have studied this in "Disciple" Bible Study or elsewhere know that the tabernacle is that part of the Temple in Jerusalem where God dwelled. Maybe you've been to the tabernacle at Ocean Grove in New Jersey or Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. The antecedent of this tabernacle, this *skene* where God lives, is a tent. A God in a tent. A God on the move. A God who will not be constrained by human edifices.

Maybe that's why, unlike Mark and Luke, Matthew does not add an editorial comment that Peter said this because he didn't know what he was saying. Maybe Peter was closer to right than we give him credit for.

Kelly O'Hara has reminded us that one of the invitations of the "Rethink Church" movement is the question *"What if church wasn't just a building?"* Which, of course, it isn't; at least, not exclusively. In four weeks we are going to celebrate Friends and Family Sunday because church is a community: a community led by a God who does surprising, amazing, life-altering things. And the saints in this community know this. And "Friends and Family Sunday" is nothing more than a concerted effort to do what a number of you have done, on your own, for years. Frank and Dolly Bonisch are here because Sue O'Shea invited them to take a look. Kate and Eric Georgelos, and ultimately Jamie and Tanner, are here because Faye Zeiner said, "Come and see."

And what we find when we submit ourselves to the guidance of God is that what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration was a reminder of what the church is. An extreme makeover of the human condition. A community who listens to and follows God's Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

It's frightening. It's exciting. It's anything but status quo. Are we ready for utter, profound, deep change; that we might submit to an extreme makeover and so offer the community of God to a broken world? *This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you.* Amen.