

“Your Spiritual GPS”

Psalm 50:1-6; II Kings 2:1-12; II Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Early last week my wife Carol and I enjoyed several days away in Vermont with my sons and their partners. At breakfast time on the morning we left we were cleaning up the kitchen where we stayed and, as one does, sorting through what food we should pack, discard or consume.

I picked up a banana that was past its prime but still edible. I said to Carol, “Let me eat this banana because it’s going bad.” She replied, “Well, maybe it’s just lost it’s way.”

Today’s scriptures remind us who Jesus is, and how that helps us, when we’ve lost our way. One reason folks come to church is to find a way to spiritually get where we want to go. More than this, faith in God means that we come to worship, belong to a faith community and seek God’s counsel because we want to go where God wants us to go. Transfiguration Sunday reminds us that God shows us the way to go through Jesus, whose identity is unique in the story of salvation.

Mark, the Gospel writer, is traditionally understood to be a protégé of Peter, so we may reasonably assume that Peter is the source for this story from Mark’s Gospel. Jesus’ “shining face and bright array” as we just sang, brings together this mountaintop encounter with Moses – the greatest lawgiver – and Elijah – the greatest prophet – who “hold(s) converse high and sweet.” Jesus both unites and fulfills these two threads of the salvation story from the Old Testament and brings us into the mysterious, bright presence of God.

Most of us know *where* we want to go in life. The greater challenge, so often, is *how* to get there. I wrote in today’s “Grace Notes” of my recent experience of having my Global

Positioning System (GPS) “cut out” in the midst of the tall buildings of New Haven as I wound my way to the main post office in search of a package my route carrier had not delivered. I very much wanted that package and was determined to get it, but just for a moment my GPS signal disappeared and I wasn’t sure how to get where I wanted to go.

Most of us are where we are in life with certain expectations, values and traditions. But then, something happens. It may be something big that rocks the very foundations of our world: a death, a divorce, a health crisis, a loss of employment, among many others. When these things happen in an organization – like a church – that is going through an unexpected transition – like a change of pastors – it is sometimes called a paradigm shift, a fundamental change in how we understand ourselves, our environments and our relationships. These experiences can disorient us and challenge the wisdom of our values or our self-understanding.

Or, like me, my pilgrimage for a package and my momentarily failed GPS, the “something” that happens may be small. It may be gradual, something of which we are only vaguely aware, until we find ourselves lost, disillusioned, unsure. C.S. Lewis, the celebrated English author and agnostic who became a Christian, observed that, “The safest road to Hell is the gradual one –the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”

The Transfiguration story is surely the former: a mystical appearance on the top of an unnamed mountain leads to light radiating from Jesus, a brightness unmatched on earth, Elijah and Moses suddenly present; the mysterious voice, unnamed but clearly God, declaring, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!” Every time I read this passage I hear the voice of Phil Rizzuto, the former Yankee baseball shortstop and play-by-

play announcer who, when observing an extraordinary play would declare: “Holy cow!”

But there’s more to the story than the drama that meets the eye. The story begins “Six days later....” Uh-oh. Six days later than what? What’d we miss? Remember that the number six in the Bible is an incomplete number, an imperfect number. The six days of creation were incomplete until – what? – God rested on the seventh day. In the book of Revelation that beast, a symbol of evil power, has the number 666 on its forehead. So the Transfiguration is bringing something to completion for Mark, and that something is Jesus’ identity. For what precedes this, six days before, is Peter’s declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s anointed messenger. Remember the story? It’s another paradigm shift. Jesus asks the disciples who they say he is. After several false starts—John the Baptist, Elijah, another prophet—Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, the One to redeem Israel. “Holy cow!”

But then Jesus begins to teach them what that means. He must suffer and die before being raised from the dead. Another paradigm shift! When Peter tells him, “Lord, don’t talk like that” Jesus brusquely rebukes him, calling him Satan for good measure. The disciples fall silent. What went wrong? Where did the script say that God’s most beloved servant was supposed to suffer? It didn’t make sense.

When I look at tragedies like the Sutherland Springs, Texas shooting, it doesn’t make sense. I look at tragedies like the shooting last week of Ethan Song in Guilford and wonder where and when we took such a turn that children shoot children. Ethan and his family are members of my friend and colleagues church, and the boy who shot him is in their youth group. I sometimes wonder whether, and how, we as the Church could do better as disciples of the Prince of Peace. And, as I touched on earlier, there are those personal trials that

come into our lives and the lives of those we love that mystify and distress us, for which we have few answers, if any at all.

This is the incompleteness, the imperfection, for which we need the Transfiguration. The story that begins in Mark 8 does not end with Peter's rebuke or the disciples scratching their heads over a Messiah that must suffer. The story ends with this foretaste of resurrection. Like resurrection, there is mystery; and like resurrection, we must have faith in the deeper purposes of the story. We do well to remember that Jesus said we needed to become like little children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I remember a child once saying to me at a church-wide spiritual renewal event "I think sometimes kids are more spiritual than adults." When I asked why, they said, "Because kids aren't old enough to know a lot of reasons for things."

This Transfiguration, this revelation of God's glory, wasn't just for the disciples, but for anybody who is in danger of losing their way. Transfiguration is the landmark when the horizon is spinning around you. Transfiguration is the spiritual GPS that tells you where you are and how to get where you want to go. Jesus is, simply, the One true Son of God. No more guessing. Nor more wondering what God is like. And we, as audacious and bodacious as it sounds, are his Body on earth. We are his people, to be Jesus one for another. For all the questions we have, there is a certainty that Jesus is God's Son, "with whom I am well pleased," to whom we are to listen and who will guide us home.