



*First United Church of Christ*  
300 Union Street  
Northfield, MN 55057  
507-645-7532  
*church@firstucc.org*

Good Company  
Transfiguration – Matthew 17  
March 2, 2014

When I'm responsible for putting the bulletin together, there's a weekly ritual we go through in the church office. I have the bulletin ready for Jennifer Kluzak, our office manager, by Tuesday and she sits down to work on it Wednesday. Then sometime Wednesday morning she yells out, "Todd, you forgot to give me an image for the bulletin cover again." "Oh, right!" I say. "Quick, Google whatever." This week my response was, "Quick, Google Transfiguration!" She scrolled through a flood of images and the image on today's bulletin jumped out at me. "Wait, go back to that one," I said. And I stared at it in silence for a long time. Jennifer started getting impatient, "Are you ready to choose that one because I have other things to do."

The title of the work is "The Transfiguration" and the artist is Armando Alemdar Ara. I've been thinking about why this painting grabbed a hold of me. For me, it shows a revelation of God that is so powerful and overwhelming that everything else fades away. God seems to be coming through everything in this beautiful, swirly mixture. I can kind of make out a mountain. I think I see human beings, disciples around the edges. Jesus and Moses and Elijah are in the center. I can't tell who is who. I can't really tell if they are three distinct beings. Where does God begin and humanity end? What is divine, what is flesh, what is the rock? It's

all a beautiful flash of divine power and presence. Boundaries fade and everything is absorbed into the reality of God.

I think the artist captures so much of what is true about this story and what is true about transfiguration moments – moments when God is revealed and we are changed because of it. I've always thought about the transfiguration story as the story where Jesus is changed, but this week I've been thinking about how those flashes of revelation change disciples. By revelation I don't mean that God is somehow only revealed in our Bible, or that God is only revealed in Jesus. I believe God is continuously revealed before our very eyes. There are moments in our lives where God is revealed and for a moment the ordinary world fades away and all we see is beauty, and wonder, and miracle, we see divine presence wrapped around everything. I think those flashes of revelation make it hard for life to stay the same.

Part of what the Transfiguration story wants to communicate is that Jesus is in good company. Jesus climbs the mountain and suddenly is chatting it up with Elijah and Moses. Scholar M. Eugene Boring notes that Moses and Elijah were both prophets who were initially rejected by the people but vindicated by God, both were advocates of the covenant and Torah, both worked miracles, and both were considered by first-century Judaism to be transcendent figures who did not die, but were taken directly to heaven. Our gospel writer is making the case that the life of Jesus is not an isolated event, rather the life of Jesus mirrors the life of Moses and Elijah. The life of Jesus is a lot like other times when God was moving and working through prophets in powerful ways in the life of Israel. Up on the mountain, we see God present in Moses, we see God present in Elijah, and we see God present in Jesus. The voice from the clouds says with words what the story has already communicated. Jesus is very important, God is saving through him, listen to him.

But it's not only Jesus who is in good company, we as disciples are in good company too. One of the themes of the Gospel of Matthew is that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. This is mentioned in the birth story, "They shall name him Emmanuel, which means God with us." And in the last chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "Go make disciples of all nations and remember, I am with you always to the end of the age."

Wherever disciples go and whatever disciples do, and whatever happens to disciples, they should remember that Jesus goes with them. So as Peter, James, and John and all disciples go down the mountain, moving toward the cross, and moving toward all that is difficult in the Christian life, they should remember that God goes with them. As the church, since the first century we've affirmed that in a mystical way, Christ is here. Every Sunday I close the benediction with a formula from the Iona community, "In the name of the Creator beyond us, the Christ beside us, and the Spirit within us." This story, this benediction, all affirm that we are in good company wherever we go, for Christ is with us. Remembering that God is with us, we're more likely to have transfiguration moments. And having transfiguration moments we're more likely to remember that God is with us.

My most recent transfiguration moments have been in nature, with those I love the most, and in an experience where I wonder if a prayer is being answered.

Last month, back in meteorological winter, my family went to Florida for a week to visit Sara's Dad and his wife. We went to see the Everglades and manatees and ospreys and alligators. We walked through one swamp that was the most active ecosystem I'd ever seen. There were gators and turtles, schools of fish, all kinds of herons and egrets, wood storks, anhingas, cormorants. Birds were diving into the water and coming to the surface and gulping down fish. We saw this so many times we lost count. And then we learned that the water bird

population is only 10% of what it was 100 years ago. It's hard to imagine how much life that is. It was a holy experience, a sacred place.

When we got home it snowed, of course. And before long I was decked out in all of my winter wear and I was diving in the snow with children. Chasing after footballs, dodging snowballs, jumping into snowbanks, feeling the same joy I felt as a child playing in the snow. Feeling the same joy I felt playing in the ocean a few weeks ago.

One thing I do on a regular basis is pray for the ministry of our church. I pray that our ministry might truly serve people and serve the world. These prayers come at random times. Something will pop into my head, I take a deep breath, mumble a prayer, and I move on with my day. I generally don't think much about these prayers. I can't think of any moments where I've felt particularly close to God because of these prayers, I just offer them.

I was sitting in a coffee shop not long ago having a conversation with someone, and we started talking about First UCC, and the conversation turned into a fun brainstorming session. I love conversations like this. The conversation settled into talking about one idea for a while, picking it apart, and the person across from the table said to me, "There's a person I know that you should talk to. I think they might be interested in what you're wanting to do." "That would be great," I said, and then the person across from me said, "Oh, they're walking into the coffee shop right now."

We called the person over, I introduced myself. On the outside, I played it very cool, not too excited. But on the inside, I was stunned. Coincidences happen all the time and I think nothing of them. But once in a while it seems like I'm experiencing a deep coincidence and this was one of those moments.

While I'm chatting with this person, all I was seeing was the Transfiguration painting on the front of the bulletin. The details of the coffee shop melted away, the people became

formless, and all I saw was this flash of revelation. I saw God's presence and guidance and movement all around. The same thing happened in the Everglades. The same thing happened when I was playing in the snow. I started seeing God's presence in everything. I was wrapped in it.

From here, Jesus and the disciples will be going to the cross. They will be face to face with the reality of unthinkable tragedy. Death that comes too soon. Death that doesn't make sense. Death that seems to drown out all the goodness in the universe. But first, there's this flash of God's overwhelming, unmistakable presence, and the assurance that God goes with us, even to the cross, even to and through tragedy.

We all know the Carleton campus is living in the wake of tragedy today. Our hearts are broken for the young men who died, for their families, for their friends and classmates, and for the whole Carleton community.

In times like this it is helpful for me to hear that our story and our faith come from a people who lived through tragedy. As followers of Jesus proclaimed that Jesus was their Savior and not Caesar, they faced the reality of prison and death for doing treasonous things. And in the midst of these horrors, they affirm Emmanuel, that God is with them and with us.

Our ancestors encourage us to remember when we are walking in the shadow of the cross, that we are not alone. We are in good company. God is still with us. There are moments when the ordinary world falls away and we see a sacred one. We may not be able to see it now, when we are lost in an endless winter, waiting for our hearts to thaw, but Easter is coming. We catch a glimpse of the Easter world on the mountain, a world filled with the power and presence of God, and we hold onto it, and remember it. This hope may just sustain us. It may even save us. Amen.