

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**February 19, 2012**  
**Mark 9:2-9**

**“Moving Closer to the Veil”**

*Come Holy Spirit! Come and bless us all.  
Fill the hearts of your faithful,  
and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.*

Today is Transfiguration Sunday—it is always the Sunday before Lent begins. Every year at this time we hear the remarkable story about how Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain and was transfigured before their eyes... which means he became dazzling, shimmering, radiant with God’s glory. And Elijah and Moses appeared and conversed with Jesus. And the three disciples who witnessed this extraordinary vision were terrified.

Welcome to Transfiguration Sunday. This is an important Sunday because this is an important story. And this year I want to be transparent and tell you how I approached writing yet another sermon on this important story.

On Monday, I did what I do every week when I begin the process of writing a sermon: I got several translations of the Bible off my bookshelf in my study at home, piled those on my desk, and then I read the passage for today—the story of the transfiguration—in many different versions of the Bible. Next I got out a hefty stack of books—commentaries, text books, scholarly analysis—and read what the experts have to say about the transfiguration. Then I prayed on the all the words churning inside me. That was Monday and nothing really grabbed me. The sermon was not taking shape in my mind.

On Tuesday I really buckled down to the I-have-to-write-a-sermon-please-help-me-God task. I consulted a book I had not yet opened, *Feasting on the Word*, and one line in an essay by the Rev. Donald Booz caught my attention. In the essay, Rev. Booz speaks directly to how a preacher should approach the story of the transfiguration—these are his words: “Here is the way forward. The first step is to decide what you believe or do not believe about this story.” That’s it, I was off and running. I began to think about what I truly believe or do not believe about this story AND about how I had approached the transfiguration in years past.

I remembered a sermon from a few years back about how we are all like Peter...this amazing experience is happening before Peter's eyes and he misses the point. Peter says, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here, let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Here is a fleeting moment of profound revelation and Peter wants to build little houses. (This is so overwhelming I think I'll do something to distract myself—I'll build little dwellings.) I remember that sermon.

I also remember my transfiguration sermon about high places and climbing big mountains and how God seems closer to us on big mountains and how extraordinary things can happen and what mountain-top experiences are really like. I remember that sermon.

But this year, Rev. Booz really affected me when he said: "Here is the way forward. The first step is to decide what you believe or do not believe about this story."

Since Tuesday, I have been praying on what I believe or do not believe about this story. And I am going to tell you that today plainly.

I believe that a thin veil or membrane lies between this earthly life...us walking around, doing our jobs, feeding the cat, going to the mall, getting a perm, folding laundry, paying bills...this here-and-now, physical-realm life AND the world of the Spirit, the world beyond this life, the world that is unseen, the world of beauty, love and compassion, the kingdom of God. I believe a thin veil separates the two.

And I believe that sometimes we move close to that veil and get glimpses of the Spirit world, God's kingdom...those moments when we are close to the veil include births and deaths and intense experiences when we feel saturated by God's presence, enveloped in God's love, moments when we know we are living in and through a holy time. For a moment when a child is born or a loved one dies we straddle two worlds. We are still in the here and now, but we are also transported, we see through the veil, we feel God in the room, we almost feel God's breath on our neck. That is when humanity and divinity kiss.

I think the transfiguration is a story about moving close to the veil. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain and shares with them an experience of moving close to the veil, maybe pulling back the veil. Jesus had been talking about God's presence, God's love, the kingdom of God being right at hand. But those beloved disciples were not getting it.

Maybe Jesus thought...hm-m-m-m-m-m...enough talk. I'll bring them right close to the veil, they will see and experience the presence of God so powerfully that they will know it is real and they will never forget.

And so up the mountain they went. Jesus became a shimmering, pulsating mass of love and radiant energy. Moses and Elijah came forward from beyond the veil and spoke to Jesus. From a cloud a voice rang out, "This is my son, the Beloved..."

I think Jesus crossed over, for a moment, from one side of the membrane or the veil to the other and he pulled back the veil and showed the disciples the world of radiant, dazzling, bright light and love that is actually always present and always available to them. I think Jesus moved close to and beyond the veil, and he let the disciples witness it.

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>3</sup>and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one\* on earth could bleach them. <sup>4</sup>And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,\* one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' <sup>6</sup>He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. <sup>7</sup>Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved;\* listen to him!' <sup>8</sup>Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.*

This amazing story sounds mysterious and remote but it is not that foreign. You have been present when similar things have happened. You have moved close to the veil. You have not been transfigured...but you have been at the bedside when a loved one died. And before they passed through the veil they seemed filled with light. And they spoke out loud—all of a sudden—to their mother, father, husband or wife...someone long dead. "Howard, I'm coming," a woman I was with years ago said a couple of hours before she died. Howard had been gone maybe 20 years. But she saw him, he was there, on the other side of the veil, beckoning to her, easing her transition, helping her cross over. I have no doubt Howard was there.

And I have no doubt that when Jesus, Peter, James and John went up that mountain and Jesus went close to the veil that Elijah and Moses were right there. Sure they were long dead, but they were present on that mountain talking with Jesus. When you move close to the veil you see loved ones, peace, God, serenity all right there. Jesus moved close to the veil on that mountain and three disciples watched.

Maybe moving close to the veil and seeing through the veil is what enlightenment is all about. Maybe when our Buddhist brothers and sisters speak about enlightenment it is recognizing that we are living just this side of the veil...pull back the veil and see how we are all connected, we are all God's beloved family, we can all be drenched in love and goodness, we are all one, really. We are all one really. Maybe that is enlightenment...pulling back the veil...seeing that we are all siblings, seeing that God is always near, seeing that peace and love can reign forever, seeing divine energy dazzling and radiant filling the earth.

Just before he died Steve Jobs said, "Wow, wow, wow."  
Maybe he was straddling this life and the next and he just pulled back the veil. The same thing may have happened in 1827 as poet William Blake lay dying. On the afternoon of his death Blake burst out singing because he was filled with the joy of the things he saw in heaven.

But the transfiguration story is not just about straddling the boundary between this life and the next...it is not just about crossing over in what we call death. The transfiguration story is about being aware of the powerful presence and glory of God every moment and realizing we are all beloved and precious in God's sight. Once we pull back the veil of our supposed isolation, our fictitious separation from one another, our misguided belief that we are small unimportant beings on a treadmill called life, once we see beyond that false reality, we can pull back the veil at any moment and see that we are precious, radiant, intertwined, and deeply connected to each other and to God.

Listen to this account by Trappist Monk Thomas Merton. Although Merton spent most of his adult life in a Kentucky monastery, he happened one day to be in downtown Louisville. Suddenly it was like he pulled back the veil...there on a busy street corner he saw the world, God, and the human family in a new way. These are his words from the book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

*An Louisville, on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another, even though we were total strangers. I have the immense joy of being human, a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm, now that I realize who we really are. If only everybody could understand this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of convincing people that they are walking around shining like the sun!*

To Thomas Merton people were walking around shining like the sun...sounds like they were being transfigured right in front of him, on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, sounds like Merton pulled back the veil and saw that God was right there, saw the true reality that we all part of the same family...

“they were mine and I was theirs...” not the false reality that we are separate and God is someplace far away.

Rev. Booz put it quite simply in one of the fat textbooks I have weighing down my desk at home. When reflecting on how a preacher might approach the story of the transfiguration, a story so outrageous, so out of this world, so unbelievable, so confusing to so many, Booz said simply: “Here is the way forward. The first step is to decide what you believe or do not believe about this story.”

What I believe about this story is that there is a thin veil, a membrane that separates this world of lottery tickets and buy-one-get-one-free sales, this world of Super Bowl games and Presidential elections, this world of dentist appointments and retirement plans...this earthy, gritty, daily, mundane, everyday-living world... AND the world of revelation, enlightenment, wasteful loving, saturated God presence, and pure, un-rob-able peace. There is a thin membrane separating the two.

What I believe about this story is that Jesus stopped explaining and just said, hey, you three, come with me. And Peter, James and John hiked up a big mountain with Jesus. And Jesus pulled back the veil and said See.

See God’s glory. See how close God is every minute.

See people who have gone on before you, see them right here.

See the radiance.

See that there is so much more to life than the daily drudgery you usually put up with. See.

I think Jesus let those disciples move right up close to the veil. And said Look.

See the kingdom of God. Look. Believe. Remember.

Separation is an illusion. Isolation, illusion. Desperation, illusion.

You are never alone. God is near. You are loved.

And you are walking around shining like the sun.

Amen.