

St James United Church



Message for March 2, 2025

Transfiguration Sunday (Last Sunday after Epiphany)

“Learning to Let Go” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

2 Corinthians 3:12-13 and 16-18; Luke 9:28-36; excerpt from Mary Oliver’s “Power and Time” in *Upstream*.

As I said as at the start of the service, today is the last Sunday in Epiphany, our last gathering for worship before we enter the more reflective, even sombre season of Lent. In this it bridges the contrasting energies of these times of year. Since January, the stories have focused on learning who Jesus is, discovering his purpose, discerning how we can share in it. In this the season was emergent, growthful, pointed toward light and glory. But come Wednesday we shift toward stories directing us to the consequences of his purpose, and so they’re about releasing, letting go, as we walk with him from light into shadow, walk toward Jerusalem where storm clouds are gathering.

These energies are reflected in today’s readings, especially our gospel. It begins in what seems triumphant. For a few weeks we’ve been on the plain as Jesus taught the people. But today we climb with him up a mountain so he can pray with Peter, James and John. As we heard, during this prayer he begins to shine, his inner life revealed. And he isn’t alone. He’s joined by Moses and Elijah. How glorious! No wonder Peter wants to freeze time. But here is where it gets tricky. Jesus is having a conversation with Moses and Elijah about his exodus, the death he is to endure which like the exodus from Egypt will bring our spiritual liberation. The glory recedes.

We need glory and its recession if we’re to grow, spiritual depth coming not just with triumph but also defeat, us needing both Epiphany and Lent. It’s a repeating pattern with Lent leading to triumph again as we celebrate Easter, the night of the cross giving way to a resurrection dawn. This pattern was set at the beginning of time. According to Jewish mystical tradition, God, who is *Ohr ein sof*, infinite light, withdrew part of themselves, constricting to make space for creation to be possible. It’s a letting go, a dying even, for a birthing to be possible. And in his letter to the Philippians, Paul quotes a hymn about how Christ, the Son chose not to hold on to glory but let it go to become human, and did so, including accepting the cross, for us to be lifted up in him.

It is the pattern, but if you watched the exchange between Presidents Trump and Zelensky, you saw vividly how much we struggle with that. As I watched it, I saw multiple parties fail, the Vice President most of all, his first jab starting the whole thing. Then President Zelensky held ground that he probably should have ceded. I sympathize, understanding why he didn’t, not after three years of destruction inflicted on his people. It’s why when he got defensive, I believe Vance and Trump should have had compassion, understanding the situation and walking it back, letting go of their own need for glory to achieve a greater good. But we all know that is not in their nature. In the world of might makes right, compassion is weakness and letting go for another is a defeat.

I offer that observation less as a critique than as a visual example of what we all struggle with, me included, most of us quicker to assert than let go. I think we're all Peter, want to stay on the mountain, to hold onto the glory. But we can't. We need to release it. That's why we have Lent as a bridge between Epiphany and Easter. We don't truly grow in Christ if we focus only on his teachings. We live them when we model his life, including his letting that life go for all of us.

This is the main thrust in the portion of 2 Corinthians we read. It's an affirming passage on how in Christ the veil between us and God has been lifted. But its benefit only comes as we actively seek to lower the veil, that is to let go of ego, the false self that needs puffing up, most often at the expense of others, that blocks not only a relationship with others but with God as well. Now ego isn't bad. We develop our ego when we are small and establishing our identity. But to keep clinging to it reveals we are still children, focused on ourselves, too easily making our ego God. The veil becomes a mirror unless we engage in practices that help us decentre the ego and so to drop the veil to be in relationship with God, with others, and with our true, and flawed, self.

This is why we receive ashes at the start of Lent. The ash reminds us that our true identity is not everything we attach to the material self but instead is found when we draw away from it. It's why prayer is a big part of Lent. I like to practice centring prayer, the constant letting go of "thoughts" a way to unhook me from my own self-importance, from reacting to my impulses at the expense of others. We often fast during Lent for that reason, the awareness of hunger, or whatever we said we wouldn't have, a reminder to turn back to God, to be aware of others. We likewise give alms. In all this we find that when we let go for others, we discover a deeper identity in God.

That is the inner vision that Mary Oliver encountered. You hear it in her poems, her awareness of how connected we all are, and not just the human but all of creation. *Ohr ein sof* didn't let go of part of themselves just to create humans, not even just earth, but a multiverse of relationships. That is what we hear as God affirms from the cloud that Jesus is their beloved Son and to listen to him. God speaks to the relationship they share, speaks too of the relationship Jesus shares with his friends. There is also the relationship Jesus shares with Moses and Elijah. Again and again, relationships are at the centre of the story, relationships not just in this moment but with generations before and beyond us. And what are they to listen to? Jesus told them before they went up the mountain that he was going to let go of his life so we all could be liberated from our bondage to self, freed to make our purpose the uplifting of others. Communion reminds us of this, not just a personal moment with Jesus but in all of us eating and drinking together, our shared relationship in him is strengthened.

This whole season has been about discovery. But we need the next stage of our spiritual journey, embracing not just glory but releasing it as well. May we accept this spiritual pattern, letting go of ourselves and in the process growing in relationship with God and with each other. Amen.