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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Luke 9:28-51
"Stories of Light and Love"

There is an amazing amount of good material in the gospel passages read by Ginger.

Jesus goes with three of his disciples to the top of a mountain to pray and while he prays, he transfigures before their eyes. His clothes turn a dazzling white. Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah, the prophets, appear with him. A cloud representing God covers them and God's voice booms, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

The cloud disappears, the company descends the mountain, demons abound, and Jesus immediately engages in healing. He speaks of someone betraying him, he teaches humility and he encourages us to network with everyone in the world doing good. The final lines state, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."

This short summary tells us that this was a high point in Jesus's ministry (literally). Scholars say it is the middle point. More aptly, it is the most significant turning point in his ministry. It is said that in the first half of his ministry he gathered his disciples, taught, healed, and gradually ascended to the top of this mountain where God affirmed in dazzling fashion his chosen-ness as God's son and savior for the world. When he descended, he set his face and directed his feet towards Jerusalem where he would be betrayed and killed. There, he would rise and ascend into heaven.

We read this passage every year on the Sunday preceding Ash Wednesday and Lent. We go with Jesus to the cross reflectively during Lent and we rise with him in celebration on Easter Sunday.

You can imagine that in my 30 plus years of ministry I have preached on this passage from every angle and always look for a fresh way to approach it. This week, the message was given to me in the San Francisco Theological Seminary article on Dr. James Noel, who died early in the week. He was the H. Eugene Farlough, Jr. Chair of African American Christianity and Professor of American Religion at the seminary.

James was a good friend of Stephanie and me and an extremely popular professor and teacher at the seminary and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. In 2012, his GTU colleagues honored him with the distinguished professor award, given to those "who embody the scholarly standards, teaching excellence, and commitment to ecumenism that define the GTU."

Always the pastor, James served three churches in the Bay Area, Marin City, Richmond and San Francisco. Before his death, he was associated with New Liberation Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. I shadowed him full-time for three weeks in a seminary-sanctioned ministry when he pastored St Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City in the early eighties. That was before he did his PhD and before he joined the seminary. What stood out in those days was his powerful, prophetic preaching. We had many excellent conversations.

The transfiguration gift given me this week was this paragraph in the seminary article, "As an undergraduate at UC Berkeley, he met Raam Somayajulu, a researcher in physical chemistry. Away from class, Somayajulu gathered people together to discuss quantum theory, yoga meditation and consciousness, body energy and the teachings of the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Pantajali's Yoga Sutras. These conversations led Noel to follow a path that led to practicing tae kwon do. After he entered SFTS with the idea of studying comparative religion, he read the story of Jesus' transfiguration in Matthew 17. In it, Jesus led his disciples to the top of a mountain where he glowed like the sun. Then Jesus led his disciples back down the mountain where he performed a healing. 'I realized all of a sudden that Jesus was my guru,' Noel said. 'I thought the spiritual practices I was doing would lead me to enlightenment, only to discover that Jesus had already done it for me.'"

Here, we have an expression of the transfiguration in a child of God, a special human being, and one can say that everything James said and did from that point on was an expression of this realization and James never looked away from the cross for in the cross he saw his savior who suffered for the liberation of all, and especially for African Americans, and for the liberation of the legacy of slavery in U.S. history.

It encouraged me to think further that our enlightenment and courage to live the gospel of Jesus also comes from this powerful story of Jesus going up the mountain, being affirmed as light of the world and going down to experience death and resurrection.

When we ordain and install officers of the church today, we affirm this light and enlightenment. When we celebrate Holy Communion we affirm Jesus's light and life, and when we eat soup and donate cans of soup or give a dollar for the San Francisco Food Bank, we become lights for the world. All our lives, everything we say and do, are light and love for the world. When we live our lives in Christ, we proclaim Jesus, God, New Law, Prophet, Son and Savior. Amen.