**“Shiny Things”** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Youth/Transfiguration Sunday The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36 Saint Paul, Minnesota
March 2, 2025

When Gail and I were in our 20’s, we travelled to Egypt to visit her parents who were then living in Cairo. My father-in-law had recently retired from the Bureau of the Census in Washington, D.C. but had been recruited by the University of Maryland to work on a Federally funded project to assist the Egyptian government with their national census (no doubt the current administration would deem this to be *“wasteful spending!)).*

It was a fantastic trip: we toured the Pyramids of Giza, the Egyptian Museum, the Great Sphinx, the Khan El-Khalili Market, and Coptic Christian Churches; we then flew to Luxor in Upper Egypt and cruised down the Nile (with a real Egyptologist as our guide) to the Valley of the Kings and saw the Temple of Hatshepsut, Karnak Temple, and Luxor Temple and the tombs of Ramses V and VI which were spectacular.

We also took a *“road trip”* and saw the burial place of Anwar Sadat who had been assassinated a few years earlier for making peace with Israel and then to a beautiful resort on the Red Sea called Sharm El-Sheikh where we slept in an uncomfortable hut on the beach!

The highlight for me, however, was Mt. Sinai (also known as Jabal Mousa). We drove to St. Catherines Monastery, the oldest continuously inhabited Christian monastery, built between 548 and 565, which is located at the foot of Mt. Sinai and prepared to ascend the mountain the next day, where Moses received the Ten Commandments—7,497 feet!

It’s too hot to attempt this ascent during the day, so (with many other tourists) we arose at 3:00 am in the dark and put one foot in front of the other on steps with steep inclines that had literally been hued out of the rock by monks with chisels over the centuries.

There were resting places along the way with small chapels (dwellings) for contemplation (but I used them mostly to catch my breath!). About halfway up we entered a foggy cloud, and it was impossible to see a few feet in front of us. And the higher we climbed, the thinner the air became and the harder it was to breathe. At times it was scary, the steps were slippery, it was hard to see and breathe, and the thought crossed our minds more than once that if we were to have a fall or a medical emergency—we would be in trouble.

However, by 6:00 am we had arrived at the top of the mountain where an open plaza had been constructed, surrounded by a four-foot wall, where a good number of people had gathered. And to the east we could see that the sun was beginning to rise, just peaking up above the surrounding mountains, when suddenly we were all bathed in the light of the sun and our faces shone and our clothing glowed—and it was impossible not to think of the stories of the Ten Commandments and the Transfiguration. It was a transcendent moment that I will never forget.

But then we had to make our way back down the mountain, back down to the monastery with our legs already sore, feet tired, we were hungry, with crowds of people nipping at our heels. It was slow going, the descent seemed to take longer than the ascent.

However, we knew that we would be able to tour the monastery when we reached the bottom where some of the most ancient and important pieces of Christian iconography and art were housed as well as many of the oldest and important biblical manuscripts were stored in the library.

Alas, we encountered a crowd when we reached the monastery and were told that the monastery was closed because one of the monks had died. We had travelled hundreds of miles through barren desert to see one of the most important Christian sites from antiquity, but the realities of life *back in the real world* had other ideas. We were back in reality.

To the extent that we can comprehend anything about the *Transfiguration,* we should pay attention to the way this lectionary reading starts, with *“these sayings”* Jesus shared with all of the disciples *eight days earlier.* Celeste Kennel-Shank says that in each of the synoptic gospels Jesus explains to the disciples that he must undergo great suffering. Donald Kraybill writes in *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, a classic of the Anabaptist tradition, that the *divine presence* and confirmation of the words spoken at Jesus’ baptism *reaffirm the path of suffering love for Jesus as Messiah.* The Transfiguration is a *foreshadowing* of how Jesus will restore God’s kingdom *not* through violent overthrow of the oppressors *but through transformative nonviolent love.* Wearing the white robes of a martyr who has persevered through persecution—as in the books of Daniel and Revelation—Jesus allows Peter, James, and John to see his resurrected body. *This is the glory that only God gives, the glory that the kingdoms of this earth cannot give.*

The disciples, of course, do not yet understand—maybe none of us can ever truly understand—the risks when we choose the way of Jesus. Especially now, when there is much strife within the body of Christ [and in our body politic], when those we may consider our antagonists are reading the same scriptures and singing the same hymns. We may *lack certainty* that ours is the one right way. Yet we can continue to seek the God we have encountered, through a veil, through a cloud. And sometimes we’ll see glimpses of glory.

For example, we (as you know) are living in a moment of profound political disruption, social unrest, and deep uncertainty about the future. Across the country, congregations are grappling with what it means to lead in this time of chaos and collapse. Many are asking: *What is our role right now? How do we show up for our communities in ways that matter?*

The good news is that there isn’t just one answer. Congregations are already responding in creative and courageous ways, stepping into the moment with justice, compassion, resilience, and imagination. In this time of turmoil, faith communities are not just passive observers; they are *firewalls* against injustice, *anchors* of connection, and *incubators* of hope.

Cameron Trimble, a church consultant with *Convergence,* suggests that there are *four* key pathways congregations are taking to meet the challenges of this time. Each offers a different approach, and some congregations may find themselves weaving elements of multiple pathways together. What matters most is that we move with intentionality and courage as we discern our role in shaping the future.

***1. The Activist Congregation: Standing for Justice***

Some congregations feel called to take an outspoken, public stance for justice. These communities are advocating for democracy, protecting vulnerable populations, and actively resisting policies that threaten human rights. They understand that faith and activism are deeply intertwined, and that working for justice is a sacred calling.

 Activist congregations might:

* **Advocate for marginalized communities**, including immigrants, LGBTQ individuals, and those facing economic hardship.
* **Defend democracy** by mobilizing around voting rights and civic engagement.
* **Challenge authoritarianism** by standing against policies that erode human dignity and democratic values.

This pathway is not always easy, but it is necessary. It calls for boldness and prophetic courage, the willingness to speak truth in a time of rising injustice.

***2. The Safe Space Congregation: Offering Refuge and Healing***

For some, the most urgent need is to create places of refuge—sanctuaries of care, safety, and belonging. As people navigate rising hostility, fear, and division, congregations can be places where the vulnerable are sheltered, the hurting are tended to, and love is made tangible.

 Safe Space congregations might:

* Create trauma-informed, affirming **environments** where all feel welcome, particularly those marginalized by society.
* Offer direct support services like mental health care, housing assistance, and legal aid.
* Form sanctuary networks that provide protection and advocacy for immigrants and others at risk.

In a world that feels increasingly hostile, these congregations embody the radical hospitality and love that faith calls us to live out.

***3. The Connector Congregation: Weaving a Stronger Social Fabric***

Many congregations are stepping into the role of community bridge-builders, recognizing that deep divisions and broken relationships are among the greatest threats we face. These congregations focus on connection, mutual aid, and creating networks of trust that help communities weather the storms of disruption.

Connector congregations might:

* Foster community relationships through partnerships with schools, nonprofits, and neighborhood groups.
* Create mutual aid networks where members share resources, skills, and support in times of need.
* Engage in local initiatives around food security, affordable housing, and environmental sustainability.

These congregations are healing what has been fractured, ensuring that people are not isolated in a time of growing uncertainty.

***4. The Positive, Alternative Futures Congregation: Cultivating Hope and Imagination***

While many are focused on immediate crises, some congregations feel called to look beyond the present moment and dream boldly about the [future](https://convergenceus.org/futures-labs/). These communities are centers of storytelling, imagination, and vision—creating alternatives to the dominant narratives of fear and scarcity.

Alternative Futures congregations might:

* Create spaces for storytelling and deep visioning, where people can explore what a just, loving world could look like.
* Celebrate and teach alternative values like nonviolence, simplicity, and ecological responsibility.
* Empower artists, elders, and culture-makers to inspire and illuminate new ways of living.

In times of despair, these congregations remind us of what is possible. They teach us that hope is not passive, it is a discipline, a practice, a radical act of faith.

Of course, no congregation can do everything. But every congregation can do something. The question is: What is ours called to do?

Some communities will focus on direct activism. Others will prioritize healing. Some will bridge divides, while others will offer a long-term vision for what is possible. All are needed.

But let’s be clear: this moment demands boldness, creativity, and courage. As faith communities, we must be clear about our role in shaping what comes next. We cannot sit on the sidelines. We are called to be the hands and feet of justice, compassion, and radical love.

We are being called to step forward, act with intention, and lead with faith. The future is being written now—and our congregations have a role in shaping it.

Friends, today’s scripture invites us to ponder contemplative activism and prophetic and prayerful witness. There are many ways to witness. In her later years, when her health prevented her from protesting, Dorothy Day commented that she could still pray. We need to let the light of transfiguration shine in the way God calls us given our personality, life experience, responsibilities, and context.

Transfiguration is about today and also about tomorrow and the impact we have on the world beyond ourselves. The world is healed one act at a time, and a process-relational vision invites us to commit ourselves to be people of transfiguration, God’s companions in the ancient Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world.