

“Sacred Center”

Matthew 17:1-9

I love to go back to Door County, Wisconsin, the peninsula where my father grew up in Sister Bay, a beautiful town on the Bay Side of the Peninsula. That’s the land I connect to, deep in my soul. I’m sure you have a place with such a connection. This spring, Jeff and I will be taking part in a Birding Class at a Danish Folk School, the Clearing, for a week in May, way north on the peninsula. Could be a cold and rainy week! Many of my people on the Bahlert side are buried there, and I love to go to stand at the graves of beloved aunts, and my grandparents, Ginter and Martha Bahlert.

Door County is beautiful country –almost like a Midwestern Cape Cod, without the superhighways. I know the names of the places and the people there well. Door County has rolling hills and orchards, and water on both sides, cold water of Lake Michigan and Green Bay. When I was a child, we’d put our wooden poles into the water of the Bay and perch would appear, in a moment! Dad would clean them and mom would fry them for dinner.

When I go back, I suppose I want to bring back the feelings that were present to me there when I was a child, visiting each summer with my parents. We often rented a small, small, simple cabin in Sister Bay. Some days, Dad would drive around all day, showing us places he’d known as a boy, as a young man, and even as an adult, before he got work in Milwaukee, after the Depression had ended. He’d talk the whole time – he was extroverted, with a sparkle in his eyes! – and every year we went to the same places. I remember Dad visiting Ray, the brother closest in age, on his small farm outside of Bailey’s Harbor. Dad would stand with his hat in his hand, seeming somehow formal with his brother. I remember our visits to see Irene and Edna, my beloved aunts. One, reserved and thoughtful, the other, “out there,” like Dad.

I felt a lot of love there. I felt a lot of love in my family. That’s what I’m looking for when I return. I still love the land, but I’m looking for the love I felt there.

My trips to Door County are like the booths the disciples wanted to build when they saw Jesus transfigured, “his face shining like the sun, his clothes white as the light.”

We do that, as people. We experience a miracle, and we build a shrine. We want to know God, and we build a church. Someone has an experience of God – as John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, found his heart “strangely warmed,” and we craft an institution.

I think what we are all longing for is that experience of God, that knowing that we have known God. And when we have the experience, we want to hold on to it, forever, just as it was.

The transfiguration is a high point in the life of Jesus, to be sure. He must have had some sort of mystical, spiritual experience, and oddly enough, the disciples saw it happen. They witnessed it. I’m not sure that was true of the Baptism, when the Spirit spoke to Jesus. Perhaps that was for him alone. But here, the disciples witness to the miracle, the transfiguration, when Jesus face shone.

In the Russian Orthodox tradition of Christianity, a tradition with lots of mysticism, monks have been known to glow as others approached them. Have you seen that glow on the face of someone you love? Have you seen that glow on a mother’s face, as she looks with pride and abandon into the face of her child? It’s real, you can see it, the glow of love.

The transfiguration is a high point in the life of Jesus. When he comes down from the mountain, he tells the disciples to not say anything about what they’ve seen, “until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” He is letting the disciples know that this high point will be followed by other happenings. This train of events we will follow in the coming weeks, during Lent. We will follow Jesus and the confused disciples to the Cross on Calvary, the crucifixion, his death, the lowest ebb of the story.

Pam Coy, a retired United Methodist Pastor and friend, wrote this on her blog last week.

“Jesus, the teacher, who had walked the dusty path with his followers, was transformed. His face shone like the sun and his clothes were dazzling white. How can people in this scientific age believe this really happened? I’m not as concerned with the ‘news-cast’ view of scripture as I am the deeper communication about the nature of the divine. There is more to the ‘ordinary’ than we can ever imagine.

This week, as I walk the dogs late at night, I haven’t been able to see the stars. It’s been snowy and rainy all week. I’ve really wanted to see them! If you remember from last week’s blog – it’s my new thing. I’ve checked the star charts and I’ve got a whole set of new stars to look at. There is the winter triangle, Betelgeuse, Sirius and Procyon. The mythology says it is Orion and the two dogs following. Jupiter, I’ve learned, is the bright ‘star’ setting in the west in the evening.

Before sunrise I should be able to see Scorpio with the moon at the head. But, I can’t see any of them!!

I learned a more mysterious story about the stars. Betelgeuse – the big orange star – is very old and set to fall in on itself and then blow into a huge supernova –which could be seen at night from earth. The supernova might make the star as large as the moon. Betelgeuse is connected to some of the 2012 theories – that it will somehow disrupt the earth by the explosion. Most scientists say no – it’s too far away. But there is a mysterious part. Since the star is between 600 and 1300 light years away, the explosion might have already happened 600 or more yrs ago. Our ability to see it will only happen when the light gets to us. Or if it happened today we wouldn’t know for 600 – 1300 years.

Great things might be happening but our puny consciousness doesn’t have a clue.”

“There is more to the ‘ordinary’ than we can ever imagine.”

That’s true of your ordinary life, and mine. That’s true for those in the Middle East and Africa who are dying for freedom today.

The message is always the same: the answers we are looking for don’t lie outside of us, they are within. Your answers are within. Jesus did not do what he did by following some rules, some ideas, some set of laws. Jesus did what he did by listening to the Sacred Center, the One within, the one we are all looking to find in these busy, difficult, loud, and even dangerous times.

The United Methodist Church is listening for its Sacred Center, also. This congregation is, as well. We have long known that the way we’ve been doing things hasn’t worked for a long, long, time. Like all institutions, we’ve gone on as if nothing has happened, but everything has happened. We put up our booths a long time ago, and now we are trying to find the money to maintain them.

And God is still working in the world, leaving us behind, maintaining these booths.