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Unmasking the Powers

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What was the Chinese Proverb so often quoted at 2020's beginning, "May you live in interesting times?" These are very strange and different times in which we live. 50 Days ago, the number of persons being infected and those dying across America/throughout the world were exponentially spiraling out of control as many gathered for Thanksgiving and Christmas, many not wearing masks, no one in Arizona had yet been able to Register let alone receive their Vaccines, and there was rumor of variations. This pandemic is now far from over; and yet how many of us have been able to register, to receive one or both vaccinations? There are now three different vaccines in production, and the world's Superpower nations purchasing vaccines to pass along to impoverished nations. Where will we be in another 50 Days?

This morning is a different kind of day. This morning I need for each of us not only to use your intellect, reason and rational thought; I encourage and invite you to use your imagination, to unleash the Spirit within you to Wonder, to consider possibilities beyond what you have been taught to believe. This morning I ask you not only to use your mind to draw conclusions, but to consider SPIRITUALLY what is beneath the surface, not only what is literal, but what we want to believe could be true.

Part of a preacher's responsibility is to unearth what is under the surface, what symbolism is beneath a story. Traditionally in Christian Churches this is Transfiguration Day when Jesus went up the Mountain with Peter, James and John. Being the 14<sup>th</sup> of February this is also Valentine's Day when we think of Love. Tomorrow being the 3<sup>rd</sup> Monday in February this is Presidents' Day Weekend. With the 2<sup>nd</sup> Impeachment Trial, this is/has been a time of anxiety and a good deal of anger. Wednesday is the beginning of Lent. While we celebrate the possibility of rain, 41 States are buried beneath snow and ice of winter storms. In some parts of the Church today is recognized as Quinquagesima.

Reading the Gospel of Mark, I get the sense of Differing Realities with differing purposes. Prior to the Mountaintop Transfiguration, emphasis on the Messiah in those 8 Chapters had been upon "Jesus as the Incarnation." What does it mean for Jesus, what does it mean for the world, that God is human in Jesus? As they come down the mountain, and throughout the remaining 8 Chapters, Jesus describes that the purpose of "the Messiah, the Christ, his being One with Us, is to suffer and die on the Cross." Transfiguration literally means "Change," and this morning we stand at the precipice between Christmas followed by the 50 Days of Jesus' Epiphany and Baptism; and 50 days from now until Easter's Resurrection. The alternative name for this morning, meaning 50 days after and 50 days before is QUINQUAGESIMA, and you thought Transfiguration was a mouth-full.

One of the most intriguing books I came across in recent years is a book of fiction called Einstein's Dreams, theorizing that at differing times in his life before arriving at his final Theory of Relativity, Albert Einstein played "What If?" with trying out differing theories of time and space and relativity, much as you or I may work a hobby from differing directions. The book explores 30 fictitious theories. Most are mystical, dream-like. Some are like the movie Groundhog Day, with people not remembering what has gone before, where

people repeat exactly the same conversations and events over and over. Another, where time moves faster or slower depending upon elevation, so people try to build their homes on mountains or stilts with bridges between so as to slow down and enjoy life. One dream reality where there would be no PAST with no Reflection, no Memory; a different reality with NO FUTURE and therefore no Hope or Imagination.

In between the PAST of Jesus going up the mountain, and their future where they come down, we have this dream-like mystic reality where Peter, James and John, 3 of the most ordinary of Jesus' Disciples witness Jesus in conversation with Moses and Elijah.

Don't you wonder what their conversation was all about?

Something like the musical HAMILTON's "Being In the Room" or a dinner party with Napoleon Bonaparte, Abraham Lincoln, Neil Armstrong, Albert Schweitzer, Madam Currie, Mahatma Gandhi all met together! Those are conversations we would love to be part of. Earlier interpreters identified Moses as the Law Giver, and Elijah as first among the Prophets, so this could have been discussion about how all the LAW & PROPHETS would be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

BUT ALSO, Moses saw the backside of God and Elijah heard God as a still, Small Voice; these are two Old Testament Heroes who had direct access to God. But so also did Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, what is different about Moses and Elijah?

I wonder, that Moses and Elijah each had Mountaintop experiences with God, who also had experiences with people where Moses fought against worship of a Golden Calf and Elijah competed with the worship of Baal idols, suggesting Jesus would be one with God and also with people who would betray him.

Last week we had a number of persons with us in-person for worship who identified themselves as "strangers." Some who had never been with us before, some who because of the pandemic had been in other states for the last year, some who lived locally and had not come out for a year, a few who used to be part of life among us who had stayed away and now were trying to come anew. One among these caught me after worship to say, "Your sermon made me wonder!" If ever you want the attention of a Preacher, tell them that their sermon made you wonder! ... She said "I find everything about this PANDEMIC to be as disgusting as eating worms or broken glass; but maybe instead of our trying to dismiss this disease or destroy it; maybe we could see it from a different reality?" She emphasized "As much as this idea seems like eating worms, Perhaps God may be using this disease to challenge us in some way? How do we unmask what is so horrible and disgusting, to see what God may be doing?"

There is a wonderful nuance here. I DO NOT Believe God caused this pandemic to befall us, but there is a recurrent Biblical theme that God does use human circumstance for God's purposes. Once we get over the shock of any crisis, we can take a step back and question from a different reality, the Spiritual Reality. If we UNMASK THE SITUATION, What Might God be DOING? Valentine's Day becomes something different from what it was when we were in 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade, when we actually fall in love. Ash Wednesday becomes a time for Reflection and Repentance, when it is more than the 40<sup>th</sup> day not counting Sundays before Easter.

In the Book of the Revelation to John, John writes to 7 different churches, identifying each as having a distinct Angel. What would the Angel of Valley Presbyterian Church Be like? Perhaps that Angel represents exactly who we think we are; or possibly, when we UNMASK THE POWERS spiritually beneath the surface the Angel is a challenge to our preconceptions. I asked this once of a Confirmation Class in a very traditional predominantly Caucasian Presbyterian Church that was over 200 years old, and one of the 14 year olds immediately responded that the Angel of their church was a 90 year old blind black woman!!!

Being Black History Month, it turns out that was intriguing because that church had been an active thoroughfare on the Underground Railway and only 7 miles from the home of Harriet Tubman.

Looking at symbolism, our Architecture is reminiscent of a Catholic Mission. Designed here when we were the only church in town, that architectural style symbolically said to strangers: CHURCH. Someone told me that several years ago, a family had been victimized by coyotes illegally transporting them, who took away their shoes and socks. Tired and in need, they saw the cross on top of the towers and followed this to what they perceived as a place of safety and sanctuary, where we found water and food and socks for them.

With the Valley Galley's cooking and making Valentine's Cookies, I wonder if that Angel appears Well-Fed?

What is the Sound of the Angel of our Church? Possibly the OOOsing of our Choir's Humming?

Someone shared with me the other day, that for a long time it felt like there was a Pall of sadness draped over the church; BUT now there is very much a Happy Spirit.

Given the age of most of us, as well as the Mission Commitments of this people of God, Could that Angel be in the form of of A Child from the Orphanage?

Going back to the book Einstein's Dreams, the last of the fictional dreams begins with a mushy brown decaying peach that instead of what we expect, begins to pink up. The weight of the peach firms. The fur of the skin begins to lustre. The now hard peach is put into a crate, trucked to a tree, hung upon the branch, where it becomes a flower! The flowering tree shades a grave, as a woman feels the cold. April rains slap her cheek, but she does not cry. She looks ahead several days, when she and her husband walk out of the hospital, when instead of sitting by his bedside, they sit at table together as they talk and laugh together, as she remembers a day in the future, when the two of them will be together and life will be new.

The TRANSGURATION of WHAT GOD MAY BEING DOING 50 Days from Now as we consider EMMANUEL's death and resurrection.