

**First United Methodist Church
618 Eighth Street
Columbus, Indiana 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles
February 19, 2023**

“When the Routine Becomes Transformative”
Text: Matthew 17:1-9

Let us pray: **God of the universe and God of the grains of sand. You created it all, large and small. And in every particle of being you found goodness and beauty. Remind us that we are all created in your image, creatures of infinite value and worth. And open our eyes to see the possibilities that you have entrusted to each of us. Amen.**

On several occasions folks have asked me how we come up with the book selections for our monthly book club. The truth is, they are suggestions from those who attend. I always like to know what they have found meaningful and enjoyable to read. And I trust their judgment. Some of the books are my own recommendations. Some are ones I have not read but look forward to reading.

Sometimes the books have very clear religious themes. Oftentimes they do not. I never make that a criteria for a book club, even a church book club, because I believe that lessons like love and grace and healing and reconciliation and all the concepts we talk about on Sunday morning are present in any work of fiction. It may not be classified as a religious book, but the themes are there, just like in the world around us, if we know where to look. I think of it as a bit of an adventure to read and pay attention as the author quietly points out important lessons and themes in surprising and gentle ways.

The English mystic, Evelyn Underhill once wrote, “For lack of attention, a thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day.” It is about knowing where to look. It is about knowing what to look for. It is about slowing down enough to really see what is all around us.

I am delighted that Isla Morley, the author of our book for this evening, “The Last Blue” will be joining us via zoom to share her insights about the book. Although the book centers around two main characters, a woman from Appalachia with an unusual and unique appearance and a photographer dispatched to her community to document the New Deal projects during the Great Depression. I don’t want to give away any details in the book, but I loved how the author summed up the lives of these characters with an absolutely beautiful phrase. Reflecting upon the trajectory of their lives the characters note that they have “come to trust the blessing of an unremarkable life.” What a great phrase. The blessing of an unremarkable life.

That seemingly unremarkable life is filled with powerful stories of forgiveness, acceptance, love and beauty that fill the pages of the novel. And like our own lives, we may be inclined to downplay our importance or the contributions our lives have made to others or the ways that

others have been freed from their burdens because of your presence, those unremarkable moments are filled with power and goodness.

By all standards, the lives of the characters in Isla Morley's book are rather mundane. And that is ok. In the common, everyday events of life, there are hidden blessings. In the little things that we do, things that seem routine and mundane, there are gifts to be found. Life is filled with those gifts in every direction. We didn't seek them out, we didn't ask for them, we may not even feel like we deserve them. But there they are, waiting to be received and cherished.

That is a theme that is prevalent in many of the stories of the Bible. One of the earliest stories is about the sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel. As you well know, Cain kills his brother, fueled by his own jealousy. When the murder comes to life, he knows what he deserves. He deserves punishment. And yet, what he gets instead is something vastly different. He receives mercy. God forgives him. The last image we have of Cain is God placing a mark upon his forehead promising that if anyone harms him, God will bring retribution. By his own admission, he didn't deserve mercy, but God was eager to give it.

In another story with similar details, a young man was walking in the wilderness when he saw a bush that appeared to be burning. As any curious individual would do, this man does what most of us would do. He walks toward the bush to have a closer look. From that bush, he experiences the presence of God speaking to him, telling him that he will lead the people out of slavery. Prior to that moment, this man was just taking his sheep out to graze. He wasn't expecting anything extraordinary. It just happened. His life and the life of many others were changed because of that moment.

Mundane moments. Everyday events. But from those unremarkable moments, our lives and the world around us are forever changed.

In the Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus has taken a couple of his disciples to the top of the mountain to pray. They are not expecting anything unusual to happen. It is just a simple camping trip. A hike up the mountain. A time for prayer. There is nothing about this moment that suggests something unusual is about to occur.

It is only when they arrive atop the mountain that the routine event moment becomes so much more. During that time of prayer, Jesus is transfigured. Literally, what this means is that his whole appearance began to glow. And alongside him there were the two leading figures of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. What commentaries make of this gathering is that Moses is the representation of the Jewish Law and Elijah is the representation of the prophetic tradition. And so the disciples are standing, mouths agape, looking at the shimmering presence of Jesus bookmarked on each side by the images of the Jewish faith.

Peter, one of the disciples on the mountain, is often depicted as a man of action. While most observers would be content to stand quietly and watch this unfold, Peter interjects an idea. He says to Jesus that perhaps they should build three dwelling places, tents if you will. One for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. Again, commentators have multiple understandings for what Peter is saying there. Some think he is wanting to preserve the moment. Let's make this

great moment last by building a permanent dwelling place for everyone here. Others suggest that Peter is referring to a dwelling place like that of the ark of the covenant. What he wants to create is a moveable structure so that Moses and Elijah could remain forever with them much like God traveled with the Israelites in the desert.

Both of these possibilities make a strong case. But I have always thought that Peter said what he did because he didn't know how to keep silent. He couldn't just bask in the moment and enjoy it. He felt like he had to be doing something. I don't think he knew what to make of this event any more than we know what to do with it today. I think, for once in his life, Peter felt out of place, uncomfortable, maybe even a bit unworthy of what he was experiencing.

Sometimes when preaching on this text, I have noted that only a few of the disciples are on the mountaintop with Jesus. There are others waiting down in the valley who will only know of this event from the accounts of those present. Perhaps Peter feels unworthy because he wants everyone to experience what he is experiencing. If he can preserve it, make it last, then the others can experience the joy of this moment.

But the more we try to control such moments, the more that we discover how elusive they are. We can't manufacture a holy moment. They just happen. They are the mysterious activities of the Holy Spirit. All we can do, is lean into the moment and receive the gift for what it is.

Episcopal Pastor Barbara Brown Taylor notes that "the transfiguration story defies interpretation, although that has not stopped legions of interpreters from trying." And she goes on to ask, "What if the point is not to decode the cloud but to enter it? What if the whole Bible is less a book of certainties than it is a book of encounters?" From that standpoint, the gospel lesson is an invitation to step into the unknown and pay attention to the possibilities where we will meet God in unexpected and yet very common places. We do this by relinquishing the ability or desire to control God and more of the willingness to be open to the surprising places God will meet us.

Author Maya Angelou wrote about one of those unexpected encounters as she was working with a voice teacher. Angelou described herself at that time as young and sophisticated and a self-proclaimed agnostic. The voice teacher had asked the students to read from a book entitled "Lessons in Truth" and asked Angelou to stand and recite the words. The portion that she was to read was a lengthy poem that ended with the line, "God loves me." She read the portion as eloquently as she could, closed the book and sat down with a feeling of satisfaction. The teacher asked her to stand and read it again. She began reciting it again and concluded sarcastically with the line, "God loves me." "Again," said Professor Wilkerson. He had her read it seven times and then something happened. The closing words of that poem touched her. She recognized that there was truth in what she was reciting. She was overwhelmed by the possibility that God loved her. She began to weep.

Looking back at that very mundane moment she wrote, "the knowledge humbles me, melts my bones, closes my ears, makes my teeth rock loosely in their gums. And it also liberates me. I am a big bird winging over high mountains, down into serene valleys. I am ripples of waves on silver seas. I'm a leaf trembling in anticipation."

In unexpected moments, in everyday occurrences, God is meeting us with renewed hope. Anything is possible. In spite of the self-doubts that may be swirling within and around us, there is a more powerful voice saying, "You can do this." Cain, you can walk away from this land forgiven. Moses, you can stand before Pharaoh and speak truth to power with confidence saying, "Let my people go." Peter, you deserve to be here. And to the modern day disciples assembled here this morning, you deserve all the goodness that God offers. You deserve to be forgiven. You deserve mercy. You deserve to be loved. And so does everyone else.

To return once more to the book club selection tonight, near the end of the book the author writes, "Grace isn't always handed down from heaven. Sometimes it springs up like a dandelion through the floorboards of an old worn porch, and there is nothing to do but lean toward the tuft and let out that great big breath you've been holding so long and see the seeds fly off where they may. And won't those seeds carry far?"

In everyday moments, God is meeting us, surprising us, offering us the gifts we need, like those disciples atop the mountain. God offers a bit of love. A measure of grace. A hand of peace. The gifts are all around, inviting us to receive what God graciously and joyfully offers to us all.