

Exodus 24:12-18 ~ Matthew 17:1-9

*Awesome Commission*

Transfiguration Sunday – Confirmation Commissioning Sunday ~ February 19, 2023

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### *Introduction to Gospel Reading*

Are you ready to be led up a high mountain with Jesus and a few close friends? Maybe, maybe not. Here's the good news: Physical strength, mobility, and flexibility are *not* required for this ascent. We can take this hike sitting right where we are. Sunscreen and sunglasses might be a good idea. But more importantly let's offload the emotional, mental, or spiritual baggage that may keep us from trying. Here's how we can do this right now.

- Close your eyes (*if you are comfortable doing that*)
- and clench your hands (*fingers up*) up tight.
- Imagine all the pressures and worries and tensions you are carrying (*wait*)
- Then in your own time gently turn your clenched hands over so that they are facing down. Imagine God's hands underneath yours and slowly open your hands so that the pressures, worries, and tensions you are carrying fall into God's hands.
- Next, turn your hands face up, opened, with palms up, and ask God to prepare your heart for our journey up the high mountain, trusting the Inner Voice of Love that will affirm and commission us anew, as I read Matthew 17:1-9.
- And get ready to see Christ, see ourselves, see our church, in a different light.

### *Sermon*

Where are the teens? We look around our church on a Sunday morning and let's be honest: they are few and far between. Being a teen has never been easy. But here in 2023, being a teen is a steep mountain to climb with some new and uniquely challenging terrain. Teens are navigating the isolation and disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic on their academic and social lives. Add to that the evolving impact of 24/7 social media access, where TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram blur the boundaries between real life and virtual life. Self-worth is gained and lost by the number of "likes" one gets on those little screens. I have heard that for many, TikTok can even feel like a second family. All of these platforms offer something that may feel like community and connection, but are they?

We baptize our children, eager to share our faith and teach them about the love of Jesus. We pray they experience for themselves their connection with Christ that connects us, gives us worth and purpose beyond the telling. As Presbyterians, we called ourselves "the connectional church" long before that word became a thing. Baptism marks a significant starting point. We tell them they belong, through word, through water, through prayers and promises. We yearn for them to feel valued, gifted, and chosen to change the world for the better. The next formalized big step for us is what we call "confirmation." We call it that because we are confirming the promises and truths that were claimed at their baptism.

If you think about it, in a way, Jesus' transfiguration experience on the high mountain was like a confirmation of *his* baptism. God reaffirmed Jesus' identity, purpose and worth with the very words that Jesus had heard as he came up out of the river Jordan and the dove descended at his baptism. But this time, on the mountain, God used a spectacular light show, and the mystical appearance of Moses and Elijah. Jesus did not receive a new set of commandments on his mountain of transfiguration. That's what happened to Moses when he was on the mountain. In the presence of Moses and Elijah, Jesus became the new commandment of God, glorified, and transfigured in the presence of Peter, James, and John. God's love in human flesh. A sight and an experience for Peter, James, and John to remember as Jesus would go down into the dark valley of betrayal, torture, and death on the cross.

Here at FPC, we confirm our children into full church membership when they reach the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. We all see it as a trailhead of sorts, an important time to set them on the right path where they learn the faith that has held us together, grounded us, and given us a sense of worth and purpose. So, with the help of mentors, we do our best to teach them the beliefs and practices of our faith and our Presbyterian denomination. Traditionally the class culminates with the writing of their own "Statement of Faith" that they present to the Session. A rather nerve-racking experience that can feel like a final examination. For *both* the confirmation teachers and the students: did we teach them right? Did they get it? Of course, our session is always extremely loving and affirming and they all pass with flying colors. Then we have Confirmation Sunday, in which they profess their faith on a Sunday morning during worship, officially joining the institutional church. We give them corsages and enjoy cake to celebrate. It's a joyful day.

But here's the sad truth: once we confirm our young people at the end of their confirmation class, we don't see them much after that. Rather than the beginning of a higher level of commitment, confirmation marks the day they no longer actively participate in church. I'm sure you have heard this quote before: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." We typically attribute this witticism to Albert Einstein or Benjamin Franklin. Regardless of the source, we know this witticism is true. Consequently we have decided to take a leap of faith, and let God transfigure how we look at confirmation for the next three years. With the help of a new curriculum designed by Mark D. Hinds, we are throwing out the Statement of Faith driven approach for a new one now titled: *Changing the World: Confirmation for the Missional Church*. ("Missional" is just a fancy word for what we are as a Matthew 25 outreach-focused church). The goal of this curriculum, rather driving to activate them into full institutional membership, is to inspire our teens because of who they already are in Christ, to change the world, in big and small ways, in service to Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

This approach begins from the place of belonging: we already belong to God and so do our children. The content of this class is centered on primarily experiential learning, guided by mentors, service projects, and intergenerational conversation with the elders of our faith community. Learning to be a disciple of Christ is more "caught than taught." And this relational, experiential curriculum embodies that truth. We began yesterday with an all-day retreat, a service project, and a conversation in the living room of a couple of our FPC elder/grandparent wise people of the church. In a few moments here in worship we will all participate in the next

step of their confirmation journey: praying for them, anointing them, and placing a stole around their shoulders symbolizing the “laying on of hands” with these stoles you all have helped to create. They have your handprints and signatures: hands of all sizes and ages. The stole will remind each of them that they are not alone on this journey of faith.

Have any of you seen the 2004 Pixar animated film, *The Incredibles*? It’s an absolute favorite of our almost 5-year-old granddaughter, Isabel. This delightful movie centers on the story of a family of superheroes, Mr. Incredible and Elastigirl, who are forced to try to be regular people named Bob and Helen Parr. They have three children: Violet, Dash and a little baby named “Jack Jack” who in the first movie, is just a baby. Violet and Dash already have their own super powers, but they see Jack Jack as a baby, with no special super power. Until the very end of the movie. It comes out of nowhere and lasts for only a few seconds. One afternoon as we were sitting side by side on the couch watching *The Incredibles* and I was knitting. Just before this scene, Izzy looked intensely at me and said, “Nana, you have to stop knitting for this part and look at the movie. You have to see what happens to Jack Jack!” And she was right.

This scene of how Jack Jack was changed so dramatically, leaped into my mind as I pondered Jesus’ transfiguration on that mountain. For a few seconds, Jack Jack, is truly transfigured! Not in a particularly beautiful way, but in a visually arresting display, we see him in a different light! Jack Jack’s superpower engages and leaps forth to save his family from their nemesis, just in time! Jack Jack, as a polymorph, is thought to have limitless potential – with not one but 17 superpowers, because he is a baby. In this fantasy film I see a beautiful truth. In a Hollywood, Pixar sort of way, they have caught the essence of God’s message to Jesus that day high on the mountain.

Let us hear it today: God’s message to Peter, James and John. God’s message to our teens, and to all of us: **You are God’s child. You are dearly loved. You have been chosen to be Christ’s hands and feet in this world. And what you can do is something no one else can.** Friends, that is our superpower! And this is our “awesome commission.” Perhaps you are too preoccupied to look up and see others or to see yourself the way God sees you. Here’s the good news: transfigured into superheroes we were created be, we can do our part to save the world, one breath, one relationship, one good decision at a time.

What that means for each of us is different. No two of God’s children are alike. We each have limitless potential, like Jack Jack. For us the call is to be Christ’s body on this earth, to love as Christ loves us, right where we are, right now. You may be thinking, well that only happens on a screen. Not to me or in my life. True: None of us can hope to be as flexible or malleable as Elastigirl (her body transfigures into a parachute and a boat in the course of this movie. But here’s what we can do. Lent begins in three days. Consider Lent, your forty day (plus Sundays) superhero training days, with Christ as our ultimate superhero.

I have four quick suggestions to get us on the path of transfiguration. Ways to see God, yourself, and all you are facing in a different light. These suggestions are simple, but that doesn’t mean they are easy.

1. **Find a way to do less.** (This is perhaps the hardest one for me!) Choose to be less busy (even if it's busy doing good things). Sometimes the busy can drown out the still, small voice of God calling to us. Think to yourself, "do I really have to run that errand?" "Would I be running out and buy this if I didn't have the coupon?" Instead, try lingering and deepening the experience of those things you choose to do. Spend a little longer talking with and listening to a friend. Let the Spirit shape your path, perhaps going a different way home. Walking instead of driving. You get the idea.
2. **Find a way to quiet your life.** How you do this will be different for each of us. It might be TV, or social media, or pod casts. Whatever noise and videos (we have so many devices and screens to choose from) typically fill your day, try fasting from them, at least for a few minutes to begin with. See if you can build up to ten minutes or a half an hour.
3. **Find something to give up.** It could be a habit, or something you eat or drink that you don't really need. Or perhaps you know is not that good for you to begin with. Of course, when clever sassy church kids hear this, they like to say, "Okay, I will give up church for Lent!" One that could be a good one for all of us might be to give up judgment! Try giving up judging others, judging yourself for Lent. Or maybe just start with one day. Even the goal can help us become aware of our reflex to judge.
4. **Find something to add.** Something that brings you closer to your center, to God in you, to seeing the image of God in others. You could add finding a small niche in your day to read our FPC Daily Meditation book, to be still, and to pray. One thing I have added for several Lenten season is to write one note a day (handwritten, with paper, and an envelope) to someone I know, often people I love but are friends or family who live faraway.

The glory of God is planted deep within each of us. That is our superpower. The more we lean into God, the more God's glory will be revealed. The more we will see each other, ourselves, and this world in a different light. Awesome commission: for our confirmands. And for us.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark D. Hinds, *Changing the World Confirmation for the Missional Church*, Revised and Updated, 2.0 version to be published this Spring in conjunction with *The Presbyterian Outlook*, pp. 3-4.