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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
Last Sunday after Epiphany (Transfiguration)  
February 3, 2008

Exodus 24.12-18  
Matthew 17.1-9

### **Jesus Is Not Like Us**

*...suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"*  
—Matthew 17.5

Perhaps the most outrageous claim made by Christianity is that in the person of Jesus Christ, God became like us. God became human. This doctrine is called the doctrine of the incarnation. It posits that Christ, though equal with God, took on human form (see Philippians 2), and asserts that, in Jesus Christ, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. (see John 1)

The season of Christmas reminded us of the incarnation by retelling for us the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. The season of Epiphany, which concludes this week, took that story a step further. Not only did God become human in Christ, but this Christ has been made manifest to the world, his light shown forth to the three wise men and to all people.

The texts of Christmas strained to assure us that Jesus is truly like us—fully human, and thus able to share our sufferings and even our death. But soon, the texts of Lent will offer a counterpoint; they will complete this mysterious doctrine of the incarnation. As Jesus turns toward Jerusalem and the fate that awaits him there, the stories of the coming season would have us recognize in no uncertain terms that Jesus travels a road that none of us can pass. The doctrine of the incarnation begins with the bold proclamation that Jesus is fully human, but it ends with the mysterious suggestion that he is also fully God.

The story before us this morning is the link between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent, the bridge between the two truths of the incarnation. This story is read every year on the last Sunday of Epiphany. This strange story of transfiguration helps us to see Jesus in a new light as we prepare to follow him in to Lent.

It all happens on a mountaintop. Jesus takes three of his disciples, Peter and the Zebedee brothers, James and John—he takes them apart from the rest and travels up a hill. What happened there must have been an amazing experience for those three disciples: they saw a divine light, and they heard the voice of God. Such an experience could hardly leave them unchanged.

In all of our lives, there may be moments of special religious perception and insight. They are rarely as frequent or as sustained as we would wish, but their memory does hold us up during darker and more doubtful times. Perhaps you can identify a moment or two in your life when you have felt especially close to God, especially near to and needful of God's love and mercy. I believe that God grants such moments according to a plan that is beyond our comprehension and in a way that is not subject to our emotional manipulation—we can't *create* such moments for ourselves, no matter how hard we try. These times of intense spiritual insight come as a gift from God.

If you've ever had such a moment, then you have some small idea how Peter, James, and John must have felt on that Sabbath day in the presence of the transfigured Jesus. In fact, we've come to name our own intense spiritual experiences after theirs. When we've felt especially "in touch" with the Holy, especially near to God, especially in the presence of Christ, we say that we've had a "mountaintop experience." Often our lives of faith are defined not so much by the valley where we spend most of our time, but rather by the mountaintop where for one, eternal moment we were close to God. Read at one level, the story of the Transfiguration is the story about the mountaintop experience of three of Jesus' disciples.

But of course, Peter and the Zebedees were not the first biblical characters to have a mountaintop experience. Our Old Testament reading told the story of Moses on the mountaintop. He went up to the mountaintop to spend forty days in the presence of God before he received the Ten Commandments. When he returned to his people, his face so reflected God's glory that he had to wear a veil when he talked to the gathered people of Israel. In another Old Testament story, the prophet Elijah is commanded by God to trek into the wilderness forty days, until from a mountaintop cave he hears the "still small voice" of God that had eluded him for so long. It would

seem to be no accident, then, that on the day of Transfiguration, Jesus was joined on the mountaintop by Moses and Elijah.

But the story of the Transfiguration is not just one more account of a mountaintop experience, and in this story Jesus is not portrayed as just one more mountaintop visionary. In other mountaintop stories, human beings experience fear and awe in the presence of God. That is not what happens here. Though it might be said that Peter and the other disciples have a mountaintop experience, the same cannot properly be said of Jesus. God does not reveal Godself to Jesus in this moment, but rather God reveals Jesus to those around him.

In the Old Testament stories of Moses and Elijah, we can see that they had mountaintop experiences. The same thing can be said of Peter and James and John in the New Testament. But if we read this story carefully, then it doesn't really make sense to say that at the Transfiguration *Jesus* had a mountaintop experience. The text won't allow such a formulation. Rather, it pushes us in the direction of saying something different: On that seventh day, Jesus *was* a mountaintop experience.

For all of the Bible's affirmation that Jesus Christ is fully human, this story accents the paradoxical fact that Jesus Christ is *not* like us. Jesus didn't need to have a mountaintop experience, because Jesus was already one with God. On the mountaintop of the Transfiguration, it isn't Jesus who stands in awe of God, but *we* who stand in awe of Jesus.

So, in the final analysis, the story of the Transfiguration isn't a story about religious experience at all. It is a story that identifies Jesus as the one, the true Son of God. For if we are to understand the stories of the coming season, if we are to understand the passion and the cross, then we need to know who Jesus is.

We read this story, as we read all the stories of the Bible, as needy people. We've come here to worship because we need help with our lives, because we can't do it alone. Our help, according to the mysterious affirmation of our faith, comes from a strange Nazarene who is not only fully human, but fully God as well. While Christ is as we are, and therefore *will* help,

Matthew's story of the Transfiguration reminds us that Christ is not as we are, and therefore *can* help.

The Transfiguration may be—in part—about the kind of mountaintop experiences that we are granted from time to time. But, fortunately for us, that's not all it is about. Our faith does not stand or fall on the basis of our experiences. Large pieces of the story contain affirmations, not about us, but about Christ alone.

We began Epiphany following a light with the wise men to see a newborn baby, full of promise. We end Epiphany with the clear recognition that Jesus himself was the light they followed. While the wise men were allowed to return to their homeland, we have been called to stay, and to follow the Light into Lent. The story names our experience today as disciples on the edge of a new season of faith:

...a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." (Matthew 17.5)