''Making Visible the Invisible'' A sermon based on Colossians 1:15-28 and Luke 10:38-42 delivered on July 20, 2025 by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan.

One of my favorite hymns is written to the tune of *St Denio*, It is the one we just finished singing. It begins ''Immortal, Invisible, God only wise. In light inaccessible hid from our eyes, most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise." God, we say, is invisible. The author of Colossians, writing in Paul's name, reminds us of that fact in our scripture lesson this morning. He reminds the people of Colossae that through the Incarnation, through the person of Jesus, we have "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible. . .” (w. 15-16b) These are meant as words of comfort to this church in Asia Minor that was founded by a disciple of Paul. This was a church that needed to hear words of hope after the death of the human Jesus, but they seem like a hard saying to us. How can these words possibly help us in this day when one sovereign nation is systematically trying to destroy without provocation, another sovereign nation, where there have been over 205 Mass Shootings since the beginning of this year—205! Where a global Covid 19 pandemic killed an excess of 6,345,595 people—and those are just the reported deaths! How can these words help where poverty is escalating at a breakneck speed, and greed is the currency that holds sway? How can these words of scripture help us when Jesus is no longer literally visible to us as he was, at least, to those first century eyewitnesses of his life and work? The question, most literally is: How can we make visible the invisible?

There is a classic story called "The Invisible Man" of which there have been many movie versions made. If you have seen any of these versions, I am sure that you remember that the way the directors chose to make this man "visible" on occasion was to put clothes on him. They made him wear gloves on his invisible hands, a hat on his invisible head, and bandages wrapped around his invisible face. In this way, the other characters could "see" him. But, what were they really seeing? They were really seeing only the clothes that the man was made to wear—only seeing the outward signs of him, a shell of what he really was. They really could not see him, because he was not visible to the human eye. Only his outer wrapping was visible. No real knowledge could come from this, because the outer wrapping did not reflect anything about his character. One could not see his facial expressions, his manner, or his personality. The only way the audience and the other characters in the movie could truly get to know anything significant about him was through his actions. When the "Invisible Man" made something

happen, it was through these actions that his motivations were revealed and through them his character, his very self, were revealed.

The danger of defining Christ and, by association, God in too limiting a way, when we seek to make visible the invisible, is the same danger as that in the metaphor of the "Invisible Man." If we only clothe Christ in certain types of "handpicked" trappings, then we have limited Christ and God's power through Christ to work in our lives by our own expectations. For example, if we say that Christ only works in our lives if we attend a particular church of a particular

denomination every Sunday, or if we take Communion in a specific way, or if the choir sings only certain hymns in a particular way from a specific spot in the sanctuary, then we have defined Christianity by a limited set of our own individual values and society's values. We have not, in this way, defined our faith by the presence of the fullness of Christ in our lives.

This danger is nowhere better discussed than in a little book, over sixty years old which I have mentioned before from this pulpit. It was written by a British theologian, J.B. Phillips (he of the Phillips translation of the Bible) entitled Your God is Too Small. He begins the book with this statement: “No one is ever really at ease facing what we call "life" and "death" without a religious faith. The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs. While their experience of life has grown in a score of directions, and their mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and by scientific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static.”(p. 7) Phillips then goes on to list chapter by chapter what he labels as "unreal Gods:" resident policeman, parental hangover, grand old man, meek and mild, absolute perfection, heavenly bosom, God-in-a-box, managing director, second-hand God, perennial grievance, pale Galilean, and projected image—all images of God which, though they may hold a glimmer of truth about God, are in the end totally inadequate to describe or to explain God. Like the clothes on the "Invisible Man" these descriptions are ways to make God visible to our human sensibilities, but they are, in the final analysis, all inadequate. After this list of inadequate “gods,” Phillips then goes about making an attempt to construct an adequate concept of God, all the while reminding us that there can be no such thing.

So, keeping all of this in mind, how can we know anything about God? How does revelation occur? How can the invisible be made visible? I go back to the "Invisible Man" illustration for at least a partial answer. Remember, his character was revealed not by his outer wrappings, but by his actions. I think that this is where we need to begin looking for our answer.

How are God's actions in this world accessed? How are they revealed? Where can we find out about them? The answer to this question is also contained in the letter to the Colossians. As this epistle reminds is, in order to make the word of God fully known we must look to the story, the old, old story. We must look to the scriptures wherein God's actions in history are described and where Christ's actions are told and re-told. It is through the telling of the story that revelation happens. It is in the telling and re-telling of the story that the invisible becomes visible.

As the late theologian Frederick Buechner reminds us in his definition of revelation: “There are two different ways of describing how you came to know something. One way is to say you *found it out* the other way is to say *it occurred to you*. Reason is involved in both. To say that you *found out* that So-and-So was the best friend you had suggests that you reasoned your way to such a conclusion. To say it *occurred to you* that he was suggests that although the conclusion was not reached by reason, it was not incompatible with it.”

“Classic Christianity is not primarily reasonable” Buechner gores on to say, “or something man has *found out* or worked out for himself. Christ came. He healed people. He forgave people their sins and said to love everybody including your enemy. He died in a peculiarly unpleasant way, forgiving his executioners. Christianity was born when *it occurred to* some of the ones who had known him that his kind of life was the only kind worth living, and that in some queer way Christ was still around to help them live it. Nobody figured out Christianity. It happened. That is what it means to call it a revealed religion—” (Wishful Thinking, pp. 80-81)

As Buechner describes, it is in Christ's actions: his coming, his healing, his loving and forgiving, his dying, that God is revealed. And we learn about those actions through our reading and study of the scriptures The constant revelation of God's work in this world are accessed through reading and telling the story over and over again. It is in the telling that the invisible becomes visible. This is the meaning of the story of Mary and Martha. Jesus says that Mary has chosen the "better part" at that moment in time. He does not mean that Martha's work as a busy and efficient householder is not worthy and appreciated, but at that moment in history it was more important for Mary to hear the story that Martha is too distracted to hear. Mary has chosen to sit at Jesus' feet and hear the story that she might pass it on when he is no longer with them, and Jesus is gently telling Martha that he wishes she would stop long enough to hear it too. For he knows that once he is gone, the story is all that we will have left of God's revelation to the world

through him.

The story is all we have to render the invisible as visible. Christ is made visible. This is why the Trinity is such an enduring symbol for the divine, because it is a communal entity: God, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit are literally a "comm-unity." And when we do things as a community, we mirror that image of the divine back to the universe, and God is made visible. Can we stop long enough to hear and see the story playing out all around us and re-tell it? Can we stop long enough to notice all around us the glimmer of the visible actions of the invisible God in this world, or will we stay distracted, like Martha, with many other less important things? It is our choice. Amen.

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