Sunday, February 5, 1989
**THE SURPRISE OF NEW VISIONS**
Luke 9:28-36

Are you completely satisfied with your life as it is today? Then you should know that you're in trouble. For to be totally content is to have no unfulfilled dreams. It also means you are unlikely to be surprised with new visions, and you may miss some of the surprises God has in store for you.

People who are completely satisfied with their lives as they are seldom think new thoughts, or see the world around them in fresh ways, and they very rarely have deep and compelling religious experiences.

At whatever place you are in life, satisfied or dissatisfied, you have several choices:

You can give up. Stop. Take no risks. Call it quits and simply wait to die. If you are completely satisfied with your life, you have probably already made this choice.

Or you can stop for a rest. Go into a temporary holding pattern. Review your situation, gain perspective, question your expectations and assumptions, and then resume your life's journey, maybe in a different direction with different goals altogether.

Or you can continue to move ahead in basically the same direction you are going, deliberately, carefully and yet boldly, all the time continuing to examine your goals, your values, your expectations, and at the same time being open to new possibilities, new visions, and new directions.

I'm going to assume that you have not made the first choice — to give up, stop, and take no risks. We're going to be talking about the second and third choices.

You see, in many ways, life is a journey. From the time we are born into this world until the time we die, each one of us is on a journey through time. We have our outward journeys as we physically grow, mature, and move from one place to another. We grow up. We leave home. We go to school. We go to work. We change jobs. Always, we are on a journey from birth to death.

We also have our inward journeys. We mentally and spiritually grow and mature and change. We change our expectations. We discover new ideas. Our beliefs change. We see the world differently. We experience new people. We come to experience God in new and fresh ways. We leave some old ideas behind.

A large part of this inward journey is spiritual. We come to understand there's more to life than the eye can see or the ear can hear or the finger can touch or the nose smell or the mouth can taste. We encounter and experience mystery. Most of us come to know both ecstasy and tragedy, and we can be surprised with new visions.

There are times in our journeys, both our outward and inward ones, when we reach plateaus. There are starts and stops, hills and valleys. Sometimes the travel is easy-going and at other times it is a struggle.

Jesus' spiritual journey, like ours, began at birth. It was nourished in a home where religious faith was central. He learned first about God from his parents, then his larger family — the synagogue, and others. At about age 30, he heard the preaching of John the Baptist and was deeply touched by it. He was baptized by John in the River Jordan, and his spiritual journey continued as he wrestled with how he should carry out his ministry.

Soon after, he developed his own group of disciples who joined him on both his inward and outward journey. Then one day Jesus took with him three of the disciples on a spiritual journey of prayer, a kind of mini-retreat. Why only three of the disciples accompanied him on this retreat, we do not know. Sometimes he went alone. Maybe that's all he invited, or perhaps he invited the whole group of twelve, but only three accepted the invitation. Perhaps the other nine were not yet ready for the next step in their spiritual journey. Maybe they were satisfied with their lives as they were (at least for the time being)—they didn't need any mountain-top experience.

Some people are afraid of being transformed or changed in any way. They don't want to risk inner spiritual growth. Who knows where it might lead?

There are other people who let their worries and fears become their boundaries. Their worries and fears keep them from venturing forth or trying anything the least bit different or risky. Afraid of trusting the promise of an oasis, they defend the merits of the desert. Sometimes we get stuck in our spiritual growth and don't want to move on.

It could be, too, that the remaining disciples had been with Jesus at other times when they had gone apart to pray and not much happened. We all have our spiritual dry spells, no matter who we are with. Sometimes you've been here in worship and felt that not much happened with you personally. God seemed absent, and you felt you were only going through the motions. But you were here, and that means you were open to some new possibilities.

It could be that the disciples who went with Jesus did not expect much to happen either, but they made the trip. And while with him on the mountain-top, they experienced Jesus in a new and fresh way. The Bible story says, "He was transfigured before them." What does that mean?

It means the disciples, along with Jesus, had an overwhelming mystical experience — one that cannot be adequately described in words. For a few minutes at least, they experienced the world around them and Jesus in a new way. They felt totally connected to God, to Jesus, to each other, and to the creation. They were surprised with a new understanding of Jesus. It was something they had not expected.

Deep religious experiences frequently come as surprises. They cannot be conjured up or manufactured. Yet, at the same time, we need to be open to them if they are to affect us.

A physicist named Frijof Capra describes such an experience in which he no longer merely believed in a dynamic universe based on his intellectual understanding, but knew it to be so from his innermost being. He recalls that he was sitting by the ocean one late summer afternoon, watching the waves, feeling the rhythm of his breathing, when he suddenly experienced the whole environment as a cosmic dance — not just a concept of physics, but as an immediate living experience.

In his own words: “I saw cascades of energy coming down from outer space in which particles were created and destroyed in rhythmic pulses. I saw atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I heard its sound, and at that moment, I knew that was the dance of creation...". Here was the surprise of a new vision.

This physicist felt and experienced in a fresh way what he already knew by reason and study. In a similar manner, these three disciples experienced Jesus Christ in a new way. They saw and experienced Jesus as being connected to Moses and Elijah and all the creation. It all made sense and fit together.

Another individual described her experience this way: “One day while taking a walk after meditation, I had an electric feeling which lasted about five seconds in which I felt totally integrated with the creative force of the universe. I saw what spiritual transformation was trying to do, what my mission in life was, and several alternative ways I might accomplish it. I chose one and am making it happen.” It was the surprise of a new vision.

Studies of mystical experiences of every kind through the centuries show that in a mystical spiritual experience, one feels and senses the connectedness, the oneness of all creation — everything is a part of the “ALL” that makes up reality. To see, to understand anything means to first see and understand that it is a part of everything else, that nothing is separated and stands alone. Indeed, Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as the “Art of union with reality.”

To feel utterly alone and not connected to anything is the opposite of a mystical vision. That’s why solitary confinement in a prison can be the worst experience possible. Natan Sharansky, in his recently published book entitled, “Fear No Evil,” reports that while in solitary confinement, in complete isolation in a Russian prison, he kept himself going by reminding himself and thinking of his connections to others. He kept reciting the Psalms from the Old Testament from memory. He remembered his wife and brought her image to his mind again and again. When he had paper, he wrote letters on behalf of other prisoners. He said, “The prisoner who writes such a letter may not save his neighbor in the next cell, but he saves his own soul.”

The surprise of this new vision was especially important to Jesus. Again, he was assured that God was with him in his ministry. It was also a confirmation to the disciples that Jesus was indeed God’s revelation as they had not experienced him before.

The surprise of this new vision was so overwhelming for Peter that he wanted to stay there — he wanted to capture the vision, hang on to it, box it up — keep it forever. Wouldn’t we all like to do that? However, mystical experiences, visions, come and go. They cannot be prolonged or captured — only remembered.

So this story of Jesus on the mountain-top with three of his disciples has made three major points for us.

The disciples went along with Jesus, not expecting anything unusual to happen, and they had the surprise of a new vision. Deep religious experiences often come at unexpected times and then our entire world is transformed.
In fact, if we anticipate an event too much, we can program our minds to notice only the things we expect to see. In doing so, we limit what we can take in. An old Yiddish folktale demonstrates this point.

A seeker travels hundreds of miles on foot through all kinds of dangers and adversities to learn the mysteries of life from a renowned sage. After much misadventure, the pilgrim arrives exhausted in the tiny village and inquires where the famous sage, whose reputation is known far and wide, can be found.

Given directions, the seeker proceeds to a small hovel where he meets an old man dressed in rags, as unkempt as a beggar and obviously very poor. Startled that a man of such wisdom could appear so wretched, but not wishing to offend him, the seeker introduces himself, identifies his mission, and sits down. The old sage immediately sets before him a meal of wine and cheese.

The seeker, still disturbed by the old sage's appearance and living conditions, can barely contain himself and blurts out, "How can such a thing be? I did not expect this at all."

To which the sage calmly replies, "What, you were expecting maybe herring with sour cream?"

The seeker expected someone grander and more pretentious than the figure in rags sitting before him. He has trouble adjusting to the new circumstances. The sage, at ease with himself, chooses not to acknowledge the man's disappointment in his appearance. Instead, he trivializes the man's reaction. It is as if he were saying, "What you expected me to look like is of no consequence. Don't let your lost expectation deter you from your primary mission."

The second major point this story about Jesus and the three disciples makes is that high spiritual experiences, mystical visions, come and go. We cannot hang onto them, but only remember them. Jesus led the three disciples back down the mountain into the middle of life.

The third point the story makes is that "Once is not enough." We need the surprise of new visions again and again. The three disciples came down the mountain as changed people. But it didn't last. It wasn't long before an argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. It was Herb Caen, the San Francisco Chronicle columnist, who wrote in 1981, "The trouble with born-again Christians is that they are an even bigger pain the second time around."

At a minister's meeting which John Smeltzer and I attended a few weeks ago, one of our colleagues told this story:

"A family who had never been in a city of any kind were in a city for the first time. The father and son enter a large new hotel to check in, and while they wait, they see an old cleaning woman, with a bucket and mop, her body revealing the effects of hard work and age, enter an elevator, although they did not know what it was. They watch as the shiny brass doors close and the numbers above the elevator light up — stop — and then start down again. The brass doors open and out steps the most beautiful woman they had ever seen. The father turns to his son and says, 'Quick son, go get your maw.'"

Some people want that kind of elevator religion. They want to believe that one overwhelming religious experience will change them completely, once and for all. But it's not quite that simple. We do need the surprise of new visions, but once is not enough. Amen.