

In the stillness of silence

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 11, 2018.

And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white... Mark 9:3

Moses had his encounter with God in the mysterious burning bush and Elijah's encounter with God was in a mountain cave. In places like that they both became acutely aware of God's presence. God is often revealed in the quiet stillness of a place apart from the distracting sights and sounds of daily life.

It is on a high mountain that Jesus reveals his full nature to the disciples Peter, James, and John. In the stillness on that mountaintop, his appearance is dramatically transfigured, revealing him as fully man and fully God. With him in that vision is Moses, the giver of the law, and Elijah the prophet, emphasizing Jesus as the fulfillment of all the law and the prophets.

If you have ever been high up on a mountain away from all the sounds of people and places, you may have felt a mysterious and peaceful silence. It is in a similar setting that the appearance of Jesus is transfigured enabling the disciples to see him in a different light from Jesus as a man to Jesus as the very incarnation of God.

Peter, James, and John are part of the inner circle of disciples, even though they have their shortcomings. Peter is impulsive and rough-hewn and angers Jesus on occasion. In a weak moment, he will deny even knowing Jesus. James and John are known for their quick tempers and personal ambition, but Jesus saw in them the qualities of those he needed for his mission.

The full revelation of the nature of Jesus at the Transfiguration helps us to gain a better understanding of his presence in our lives. What happened on that mountain with Jesus and the disciples transcends what they knew about him up to that time. The Transfiguration marks the culmination of our search for understanding the relationship between God the Creator and God the Redeemer. It is where Jesus the man is revealed as Jesus the Christ, the anointed one of God. To comprehend the full nature of God in Christ is to gain a greater sense of the sacred. It is an awakening to the realization that the infinite nature of God can only be partially understood by our finite human mind.

If you have never had anything as dramatic as a personal experience with God, you may think that it only happens with other people. We can feel God's presence anywhere at anytime, particularly in the stillness and silence of early morning or late at night. It is an occasion to make a connection with the holy and the sacred in your life that you hadn't known before.

It is human nature for us to rely on our first impressions of people, whether positive or negative. It is an experience of personal transfiguration to see someone we thought we knew in a different way. We have to be open to get beyond our assumptions formed by making up our mind too quickly. When we are able to see people in a different light and a different point of view, when a part of a person's personality is revealed that we hadn't known before, it is a personal revelation. It can also happen when we learn something about ourselves that we hadn't known before. It could be something in our family DNA, an unknown talent, or our response to a situation that revealed an aspect of our personality we hadn't known before. When we prejudge people, we close our mind to gain a fuller and more complete impression. Once we allow ourselves to know someone better, we move past our prejudgments. We would only hope other people would do the same for us.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Julia Ward Howe wrote the lines to "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory" also known as the patriotic hymn Battle hymn of the Republic. The final verse is:

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me.
As He died to make men holy, let us live to make men free...

In discovering the full nature of Jesus, we are transfigured in our understanding of how he connects us with the presence of God in our personal lives. It is understandable to feel like a child when we pray because it was as a child that most likely we first learned to pray. As we mature, we learn an important distinction between having a childlike trust and having a childish or even infantile concept of spirituality. As we mature, it is a revelation how we become more comfortable with prayer.

God is experienced best when we take the time and opportunity to be still and alone in silence. My best time to be alone with God is in the morning before the day begins. After that, I can go off to the comings and goings in my interactions with daily life.

This last Sunday in the Epiphany season before beginning of Lent is the last of the Alleluias until Easter. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten season when we have the opportunity to take stock of ourselves through self-examination, prayer, fasting, and self-denial. While the ashes remind us of our mortality and our fallibility, we are also assured of the hope of redemption. Just as we were marked as Christ's own at our baptism, the ashes remind us that we are marked as Christ's own in our redemption.

In our success-driven culture, it may be difficult to accept that for Jesus to succeed, he had to suffer defeat and death. There could be no crown without the cross, no resurrection without the tomb. The more we accept our mortality, the better we understand personal resurrection. If God at times seems remote and distant, it is not that God has moved away from you, but that you have moved away from God.

Be part of our Lenten journey to develop a better discipline by gaining the hope of new understanding about who and what you are and where you are headed.