

Matthew 17 1-9 Last Sunday after the Epiphany 2017
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Children of the Light

God's presence fills the earth. I am always acutely aware of this when I am in nature or with animals and I seem to forget this in a hurry when I am in stuck in traffic or trying to figure out why my email suddenly will not send. I have actually come to fully trust God's presence in all of the "BIG" challenges of life like the darkness of death or the sting of betrayal or the unfulfilled dream. But I frequently lose this trust in the presence of the hard, unceasing ordinary. Sometimes it can feel like the demands of daily life conspire to keep us from perceiving God's beauty, order, oneness and mystery. And I think this is dangerous because when we lose sight of the Divine presence in all things, we lose the ability to be a people of grace, love and thanksgiving. The small tasks, preoccupations and little deaths that fill our days can block out a sense that there is more to life than what we currently experience, that we are part of something greater, that something significant is asked of us in this life.

This is captured in a famous saying of Rabbi Nachman, an 18th century Chasidic master who spent the last part of his life in Breslav, a small town in the Ukraine.

He said: "As the hand before the eye conceals the greatest mountain, so our little earthly life hides...it hides the enormous lights and mysteries of which the world is full."

Today we encounter the Transfiguration of Jesus. We join the shocked disciples up on that mountaintop as we catch a glimpse of Jesus as he truly is---- a human being utterly alight with the divine love and light of God. We have leaped many chapters ahead in the Gospel of Matthew and we meet Jesus and his disciples in that tender gap when Jesus is trying to get his disciples to understand that far from being the triumphal Messiah they think him to be, he is in fact cut more in the mold of the suffering Servant. He knows the cross is just ahead of him and this vision of him resplendent with light on that mountain top represents the fusion of the fragile human condition with the Divine truth that the brilliant, transcendent God of the mountaintop experience, is in fact present with us in our ordinary, stumbling and suffering everyday lives. As Jesus is suffused with dazzling light we hear very similar words to those we heard at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased!"

But the words heard at Jesus' baptism might seem a distant memory after the difficult confrontations, teachings and misunderstandings that followed shortly after.

Those who are following Jesus are having an increasingly difficult time understanding who and what Jesus really is. And they are having an even harder time understanding what is truly asked of them as those who would follow in his footsteps.

So *today* we also hear, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

I believe that both of these divine pronouncements hold a singular truth. They hold the truth to not only Jesus' true identity, but to *our* true identities as children of God.

These words also call us out of the notion that giving our lives to God means the end of all the pain, heartache, boredom and challenge that life can hold. Living fully in the love and light of God has never meant that we are spared the small humiliations of failure or the enormous heartaches of betrayal, loss and failed dreams.

This sounds gloomy perhaps, but there is great liberty and freedom in this truth.

Here as we stand poised on the threshold of Lent I believe the invitation we receive in the Transfiguration of Jesus is the invitation to live fully in the presence of God in all things and throughout every day.

Or, to put it another way, it's about living in such a way that we make God more present, both to ourselves and to others in the midst of all of both life's joy and pain.

This invitation is about living into a deeper reality that if we constantly claim God's presence in the midst of it all, then every word and every action, no matter how ordinary or painful, can be offered in a way that makes God more present in this world—not far off and distant. Living with this perspective can reveal the joy that also permeates our lives, sometime just slightly blocked from our view by our own hand.

The disciples experience on that mountain top teaches us that our fear that there is a gap between us and God is an illusion; in truth, God is present in every place, in every person, at every moment – it's only our perception that is clouded. Whatever actions we can take to increase awareness of this reality is a faithful act of solidarity with the divine.

We *have* the power to make God manifest in this world. We wield this power by opening our own eyes to order, beauty, mystery and the essential oneness of all things; and by bringing God's justice, love, and compassionate care with us wherever we go.

Theologian Paul Tillich once preached a sermon he titled *In Everything Give Thanks*⁴ (1 Th 5:18).

He began by contrasting the superficiality of thanksgiving in most cultures with its deeper religious significance.

He said that not only are we mortals driven to give thanks, but we also have a profound need to receive thanks.

Tillich explored what he called "the state of silent gratefulness."

This is the idea that God is creatively present in everyone in every moment whether we are aware of it or not. But when we are in this state of silent gratefulness, we are aware of God's presence and we experience an elevation of life.

Thanksgiving is at the heart of claiming fullness of life; it is a transforming spiritual practice that can change our lives. Gratitude and a foundational joy in even difficult and challenging times is so vitally important to a life of faith in that it consecrates everything created by God.

This "state of silent gratefulness" opens our hearts and minds so that we might not forget to see God even in the traffic jam or the confounding computer---or more importantly—in the actions of those we do not understand or who are unaware of how their actions wound us.

A deeper understanding of God presence in all things and absorbing all things can elevate everything from then frustrating to the hopeless into the sphere of the holy. Claiming our identity as children of God and listening closely to what Jesus teaches us transforms us into bearers of God's grace.

The life to which we lay claim as a people of faith is a life where day by day we wed the electric beauty of God's light to the challenges of our everyday ordinary lives.

Each day offers us the chance to choose to love, and not hate, to be friends and not enemies, to forgive and not to hold grudges, to heal and help and hold and not to injure, wound and scar.

These daily choices might seem to come at a high price to those who cannot understand the freedom to which the love of God calls us. But the reward of such a life is far greater than its cost.

So in the end we learn that we are not asked to build altars on the high places, but to see in truth that the Divine light of God infuses the entire world.

We are invited to let the scales fall from our eyes and see God everywhere, in every person, and in every thing. This dazzling Jesus shows us our true identity---- we too are God's children of light. Amen.