

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

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Transfiguration

Exodus 34:29-35
Psalm 99
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Luke 9:28-36

Being in the Presence of God

I wonder...What would it be like to be in the very presence of God?
We can only imagine! It seems that only happens in stories of heroic characters in the Bible.

Take Moses for example. That must have been an amazing encounter. Because when he returned from his visits with God on Mt. Sinai, Moses' face was so glowingly radiant he had to put a covering over his face.

Also, when Moses returns from the mountain, he brings with him God's word — the commandments — to be a sign of God's love and care for all God's people.

The commandments were for the Israelites, and are for us, the mark of God's gift of life. As Moses says to the people of Israel elsewhere, just imagine, a people who have a God who dwells so closely that this God gives them these commandments to live by, and promises to listen whenever they call on Him in prayer. (Deuteronomy 4:7-8)

Imagine just for a moment what it would be like to have the glow of being in God's presence. Well, that's exactly what God promises. Because something has happened for us since the time of Moses who had to cover his face because of the powerful presence of God. And his name is Jesus.

Luke tells us of a day when Peter, James, and John (Jesus' disciples) got a chance to experience God's presence up close and personal.

About eight days (resurrection day) after Jesus announces that he will be rejected and die, they all go up the mountain to pray. And then, in the midst of prayer Jesus' appearance changes and his clothing becomes dazzling white. The disciples see Moses and Elijah joining Jesus discussing his departure, his exodus, in Jerusalem. And even though they were sleepy, they saw his glory.

Then as Moses and Elijah are leaving, Peter wants to hold on — to keep the moment going. He needs to do something, anything to prolong the experience. Perhaps you've known that feeling! Please, God, don't let this moment end!

But then they are overcome with a cloud. And they are terrified. After all, they are in the presence of Almighty God. And they hear the voice, "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him."

But they weren't quite ready for such a gift. Because there on the mountain, when they get a glimpse of Jesus' true glory, all they can muster is to blabber about building some tents to memorialize the occasion.

Still, their fluster does not get in the way of God's purposes. God has a plan in mind for us in Jesus, and his words announce its agenda: "This is my Son, the Chosen One, listen to him."

There are times when listening and being ready for surprises are the most important part of following Jesus — even more important than having all the right words to say.

The Apostle Paul tells us that in Christ Jesus the veil of God's presence has been set aside for good. In Christ we can know the new freedom that is ours through the power of the Spirit who dwells with us. Whatever that means.

Through the Spirit's presence we can see the glory of God as we are each day being transformed by the Spirit's work among us. That makes a little more sense to me.

And what does that look like? That — I can't tell you — because God makes Himself known to each of us, as each are attuned to recognizing Him.

My pastor friend Herb (now retired after 40 years) is famous among his friends for proclaiming with confidence and certainty that he has NEVER had an experience of God or the Holy Spirit.

I only met one person who I believed had an epiphany. An unlikely person, he was highly rational, graduate of a great secular university and very successful. It was not a mountain top experience for him. In fact, he was frightened by the event. He could not relate the experience to anyone in his life. He felt he was going insane. He had remained silent for a year hoping the encounter would fade. Finally he came to the pastor to share the event when God spoke to him. I too was silent. There was no celebration, no explanation, no making sense, just waiting and living with the reality of God speaking.

Being in the presence of God, will do something to us. The Transfiguration is not our doing. The only actor in the event is God, the God of Moses and Elijah: the God who became human in Jesus, whose life was the way of the cross, the way of suffering and death.

Listen to him, do not be ashamed of my son, the chosen one who will be rejected, killed and rise. This is not about a mountain top experience that ends with getting to work on his behalf back down in the valley. It's about following Jesus, whose life ends with a cross on a hill.

Here "Jesus is my buddy" is eclipsed by the voice, the light, the shining, the fog and special effects to rival Lucas and Spielberg. Holy Awe as in Psalm 99. There is nothing here that humans can engineer. It really is all about God's initiative. And this God is not domesticated, but wild, and unpredictable.

And when God lets loose there should ALWAYS be angels as the advance team saying "Do not be afraid.." Because when there are no angels, we are struck dumb. Or ignorant. Silence is a good (at least interim) strategy.

Epiphany's are God's doing. And rightly we stand in fear and trembling.

Peter, James and John's response is silence. Dead silence. They tell no one. In due time after the resurrection they will remember and understand and witness.

And witness they did. How about us? In what way do we witness to the presence of God?

By what we do here on Sunday mornings? Perhaps....

By receiving the body and blood of Christ, really present in the bread and cup and in the people who share him? Perhaps...

But you know — we can only witness to that which we see and know...which takes us back to our original question...What would it be like to actually be in the presence of God?

My guess is that for us, it won't be the person of Jesus in dazzling white robes and an audible voice of God from a cloud.

But it might be stunned silence at the fresh snow sticking to the trees against the pink of the setting sun; or the peace of seeing your son or daughter home from the hospital in their own bed again; or the awe you feel when the music speaks to your heart in a way that defies words; or a moment of affection toward someone you just don't like, that sparks joy.

I don't know what being in God's presence will be like for you.

But today, the suggestion is that it will be a moment when you are left speechless, or aching for the moment to linger just a bit longer.

Maybe it will be in a few moments when we share the body of Christ...Maybe not...
I wonder, what will it be like to be in the presence of God.

Amen.