

We come to this point every year, whether we look at it as the end of the season of Epiphany or just a pause in Ordinary Time; but we come to this point on the brink of Lent and we read this text, this passage that we call “the Transfiguration of Jesus.” Jesus and some disciples, the number depending on which gospel version we read, go up on the mountain for some alone time—time to pray and discern and have some peace and quiet, to commune with God. Jesus does this a lot, really, but this time instead of being followed by crowds of people or having a teaching session something unusual happens: Jesus’ appearance changes and he begins to glow and have an aura of brightness around him. And as if that were not enough Moses and Elijah appeared beside him and were talking to him.

Now imagine that you were Peter, or James or John, there with Jesus and all this happens. What would you think and how would you feel about this?

The first thing that Peter wants to do is put up a tent for each one of them. This isn’t such a ridiculous thing, really, is it? I mean, the first thing the Israelites wanted to do once they got going was to make a place for God to reside with them. And all through the OT the tabernacle and later the temple was a central place for the people to come and encounter God and make sacrificial offerings to God. So to me this isn’t a very wrong or odd thing for Peter to propose.

But the words don’t even come out of his mouth before God speaks up out of a cloud that has surrounded them and tells the disciples to listen to Jesus, because he is God’s beloved.

Again, how would you react to this happening? Would it seem frightful to you? Would you believe it was happening, or would you think you were hallucinating?

The disciples were afraid and fell to the ground. I have a mental picture of Ebenezer Scrooge falling to the ground in front of the Ghost of Christmas Future when confronted by the truth of his empty existence—he shrank from the spirit and covered his head and ended up begging for mercy. I have a mental picture of myself doing the same thing! Crawling under a desk, perhaps, or diving behind a tree if I were in the outdoors.

Fear in this situation isn’t unwarranted, I think. It is the unknown we are afraid of; and I’m pretty sure the disciples hadn’t experienced anything like this before. Imagine being trapped in fog and hearing a voice seeming to come from nowhere. It would be eerie at least, downright scary at worst.

And of course Jesus comes to them and gently shakes them by the shoulder or touches them on the head and says, “get up. Don’t be afraid.” They look around and everything is normal again, Jesus is still there but tells them to keep the vision secret until a future time.

Do you ever wonder why things like this don’t seem to happen anymore? Or to everyone? Perhaps you’ve had a spiritual experience in which you encountered God or saw a vision; but most people don’t seem to—or if they do, they dismiss it as their imagination. I myself have had a spiritual experience that was very real at the time but at this point seems, well, unreal. And yet I know that it happened. (and regardless of what I said a minute ago, I wasn’t so much afraid as comforted—and I felt for awhile like I glowed!)

For we Protestants, though, and particularly we of the reformed tradition that Presbyterianism is a part of, spiritual experiences are suspect, are not to be trusted. Protestantism came of age at about the same time that the Enlightenment was happening; and as rationalism grew people’s trust of the non-rational diminished—even in the church, even in religion.

I was reading the transcript of an interview that Krista Tippett did with physicist Margaret Wertheim this week and I was struck by something she said along these lines. She said that prior to the Scientific Revolution people had a concept of themselves of being body and soul. Now, that's nothing new to us, I'd say that all of us in here believe that we each have a body and a soul. But as we perceive our body as inhabiting space in the world, we believe our soul occupies space within those bodies—so our entire existence is within physical, material space. Whereas before the scientific revolution people believed there were two realms of existence: physical space of the body and the space of the afterlife for the soul. And not the “afterlife” as we think of it, but as an ongoing space in which our soul existed.

This doesn't seem rational, does it? It doesn't make sense to us because we're so used to understanding our existence as purely material. And as purely material beings we're skeptical of anything that is outside of that, and we don't have language to express it or imagine it.

And so if we do ever have spiritual experiences, if we ever encounter God in one of the “thin places” that I've talked about before, we don't know what to do with it; we don't usually know how to describe it and sometimes, or even often, it is dismissed as untrustworthy or imagined—even by those who have had the experience.

I believe wholeheartedly in the concept of the thin place, though—those places in which the curtain of physical space is pulled back and we are able to access spiritual space; where we see and hear and feel the presence of God/Christ/Spirit and know that we belong. I'd say that none of us experience this in exactly the same way or the same space; but consider for a moment where that place has been or might be for you? Is there more than one place? What did it feel like—or what would you hope to experience in the thin place?

There's a place in Cincinnati called “the Hive” that is a center for contemplative practice—the practice of being mindful, or intentionally aware, of what's going on inside of us as well as around us. It's run by a Presbyterian, though at this point it's intentionally not Presbyterian; and they offer classes in four areas: contemplation, through things like meditation and yoga; art, through classes such as the art journaling class I just finished; body work, through things like yoga, tai chi and dance; and action, through classes in active listening, non-violence training, and so forth. In seeking to help people become more mindful in their everyday lives The Hive is seeking to be a “thin place” (my definition, not theirs) in which people can make sense of a world that seems to grow more complex with each passing day.

I also like to think that worship is a thin place for us, at least part of the time—a place in which we encounter the living God, the risen Christ, the holy Spirit. And that is a good question to ask ourselves: do we come to worship each week expecting to encounter God? I know we expect to see the people around us, but do we expect to see God? And what does that look like or what do you think that would look like and how would it change your experience of church? I know you come expecting *something*—but do you come expecting something, something not material but real, something that moves your heart and spirit and even your mind? Do you hope that as we praise God and show our love for God, that you will feel some of God's love come back to you—and does that happen? Our minds are with us all the time and we think a lot about the world but I'm not sure we can think or understand our way to God. But what we can do is be open and present to the ways God is working around us in the world, to expect that God will show up in likely places like the church and unlikely places like our workplaces or the grocery store or Cornerstone. Or on the street where the homeless people live their lives.

We may not experience a flash of light or see visions of biblical figures, or hear the voice of God speaking through a cloud. But we are spiritual beings as well as physical ones, and I believe that there is something more to this existence than what we can experience with our 5 senses. But we must be open and we must not be afraid. Amen.