

October 15, 2023
Change your heart, Change the world.

The Rev. Laurel Coote
Exodus 32:1-14,
Psalm 106, Philippians 2:1-9

One of the sacred mysteries of the Christian Faith is the premise that God is both incarnational and transcendent. Seen and unseen.

We learn about God, the one beyond human comprehension and above worldly limitation, from the Torah, the psalmists and through the voices of the prophets. Our Gospels speak of Jesus as the *Word made flesh*, the incarnate God who came to dwell among us; Divine God in Human form.

But it our biblical stories that bring Jesus to life and help us to have a sense of who he was, what he did, and what the experience of knowing him in person might have been like. We can picture him teaching in the temple, speaking to the crowds, extending care and healing to those in need, and breaking bread with friends and outcasts alike — even as we picture him dying on the cross, buried in the tomb, and revealing himself to the disciples in the upper room.

As 21st century Christians we may best know or experience God as transcendent — the sacred ever-present being in whom we put our trust; who we do not “see” but may sense, who we cannot touch, but hear; for whom we have no absolute proof, but yet, believe. We seek to know God, and we claim that God is real, here in the present moment. In the most literal sense, we will never have the experience of the incarnate Jesus in the flesh as the 1st Century disciples and people of Israel did. Still, we hear Jesus’ promise that he is ever with us.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he reminds the church that the incarnational Jesus is alive in them and active in the world. They need only open their eyes and hearts to find God, to see Christ in one another — to claim Christ’s presence among them.

But sometimes, God is hard to see: in others, and in the world. We can lose sight of God in our midst. As we witness humanity’s horrific acts of violence and hatred, the heaviness of the world may consume us and God may seem absent. We may experience despair and doubt, and feel that God is far from us.

The 16th century Spanish Mystic and poet, St. John of the Cross names such moments of spiritual suffering or the feeling of being separated from one’s connection to the divine, the “*Dark Night of the Soul*”. In the depth of the dark night, we may wander through the spiritual wilderness, finding more questions than answers, seeking affirmation that God is with us, or that God even exists.

We may find comfort in the words of Jesus and of St. Paul, both who encourage and reassure us that we are never alone, that God is always present with us, in good times, and especially in times of doubt, conflict, or suffering.

Our reading from Exodus tells how the Israelites lost sight of the Lord. Theirs was a hard journey, and they were in need of guidance, and hope. Moses had gone up the mountain,

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leaving them behind, uncertain of what to do. When it seemed that God could not be found, rather than continue to wait, they did what humans do — they took things into their own hands and created their own image of God — one they could see, touch and worship. As the psalmist said, “they exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox, and forgot their God, their savior, who had done great things for them in Egypt.”

But it was what transpired between Moses and the Lord that was uncommon, and inspiring. The Israelites broke the first of God’s commandments, and God was furious, ready to consume them with his wrath. What we witness next is the extraordinary divine-human relationship between the Lord and Moses. We observe their intimate relationship in which Moses acknowledges all the Lord has done and then, pleads with him to change his mind, to have mercy on the people, so to honor the promise he made to them and their ancestors.

And, God not only listened; God changed his mind, thus calling the Israelites back into unity with God. Their sin was great, but God’s love was greater.

And I think this is exactly this kind of relationship with God the Israelites longed for, and that we desire as well. We all want to have a rich relationship with God, and to know that not only is God with us, but that God hears and will help us.

The God of Israel is a transcendent God, unseen and untouchable, who is made known to us through the voice of the prophets. Jesus, God incarnate, is made known to us by his own words, actions and service to others — and through the words of the apostles.

With words of care and encouragement, Paul reminds the church in Philippi that *the Lord is near*. They have been consumed in conflict and have lost sight of Christ in their midst and so he calls them into unity: to be of the same mind and to resolve their differences. When we find ourselves steeped in conflict, we too can lose sight of God.

We see and hear of the war in the Middle East, and may wonder, “where is God in all of it?” Our hearts are heavy, and we worry, yet Paul affirms Jesus’ words, that worrying won’t help us at all. In fact, The Mayo Clinic notes that the main contributor to depression, high blood pressure, heart attacks and early death, is Worry. Essentially, worry kills. Even Jesus affirms that none of us can, by worrying, add a single hour to our lives” And still, we are concerned, troubled, and we worry. Paul calls us to surrender our worry into God’s hands, and then to meet God in earnest prayer, making our needs known to him.

This week, the Anglican archbishop in Jerusalem, Hosam E Naoum, penned a letter to the Anglican communion, of which the Episcopal church is a member. In it, he names the present conflict, he calls for christian unity, and extends to us an invitation. Here is his letter:

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Just as Paul called the Philippians into unity, so too are we, and Christians worldwide, called by the Archbishop of Jerusalem to unity — unity in prayer, in fasting, and in working for peace.

What if we took Paul's guidance to heart? He first calls us to give praise and thanks to God, to "Rejoice in the Lord always! Then, he invites us to lead with gentleness, making it known to everyone we encounter; and next, to surrender our worries to God. As individuals and as a community, we are called to turn to God in prayer, with earnestness of heart, and gratitude, as we make our needs known to God.

If we were simply to practice these four steps, we would surely find God at the center of our lives. And, in times of distress and challenge, we would be less likely to lose sight of God.

And, the peace of God we so long for, and pray for — peace that is beyond our comprehension or understanding, will be ours and will protect our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

We may wonder where God is, what God is up to, or desperately wish for God to intervene. And all of this is ok. The invitation before us is to bring it all to God in prayer — humbly, and with a willingness to put our trust and faith in a god we cannot see, nor touch, but who we know in our hearts, exists.