

Vast

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Our scripture readings today have something in common. They describe the indescribable. In the first reading, Isaiah tells us about seeing - not God - just a tiny portion of the garment of God. In the second reading, Jesus tells Nicodemus about the Holy Spirit - the wind - the pneuma in Greek. Jesus is, especially as John characterizes him, a mystic. Jesus is both in close relationship to God, and has an understanding of the Divine that the average human cannot grasp. Listen for the way the Holy One in all of Divine mystery is described in these texts.

Isaiah 6:1-3

6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

John 3:1-8

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 3:2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." 3:3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 3:4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 3:5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 3:6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 3:7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 3:8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

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Jesus is trying to connect Nicodemus to God. To the sacred. Jesus, as John tells it, is a mystic who is deeply connected to God - part of God - the word of God. And Jesus wants Nicodemus to get so close to the Divine that he would be reborn.

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus is puzzled. He asks more questions.

Jesus says it differently.

Jesus begins to speak of the Pneuma - in Greek Pneuma means both Spirit and wind. There's a parallel here with the words of the Hebrew Bible. In Hebrew, Ruah means spirit and breath and wind.

Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 3:8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus, Do you get it this time? Jesus seems to be asking? Well, no, Nicodemus doesn't get it. The idea is too big for an ordinary human.

(Which is to say, if you listened to the gospel this morning and said, I don't get it - that's okay.)

Today is Trinity Sunday. It's an obscure observance for us in the UCC. Being Trinitarian may be the idea that distinguishes us from our Unitarian neighbors, but the Trinity is a concept that's hard to grasp. I honestly think the whole idea of the Trinity came about when early Christian leaders were trying to simplify and codify something that couldn't be simplified or codified. God is so vast and complex and wonderful that no human words or ideas are sufficient. Human imagination cannot envision all that God is. God is not only immanent and God is not only transcendent. God is not only creator, not only savior, not only Spirit.

We feel God in the breeze against our cheek; see God in the eyes of our neighbors; smell God in lavender blossoms; hear God in a hymn sung by many voices, taste God

at Communion. God is mother, father, friend, savior, spirit, sustenance, good, love, source, creator, redeemer and sustainer. God is that from whence we emerge, and that to which we seek to return. God is eternal and always new. God transcends all that is earthly and yet is immanent -- close to and in relationship with every member of creation. God is love; God is the source of and inspiration for all love. And that just gets us started.

Augustine once said, "If you have understood God, then what you have understood is not God."

The Trinity says God can show up in a million ways.

Isaiah described our vast and extraordinary Creator this way: just the hem of God's cloak was big enough to fill the whole temple. Perhaps that's not a literal description. Perhaps Isaiah means, in the presence of God, in the presence of God's majesty what is asked of us is humility, awe and wonder.

But it is in the same book of Isaiah that God's immanent and loving aspect comes to the fore: God whispers to the people, you are precious in my sight, and I love you.

The good news is that God is more than we could ever imagine or describe. We may be drawn to God the tender or we may sing to God the holy and vast. The mystery of God, vast and incomprehensible, loving and close, is a blessing.

Where is God so much you can't find words to describe Her?

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(At the close of the service)

A breath meditation.

"The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes."

I invite you to get comfortable in your pew or at home, and let your eyes close.

Imagine that you are sitting in a grove of trees on a peaceful spring day. You can hear the beautiful trills of birdsong. When you look up, the green leaves contrast with an

azure sky. There is a lovely breeze. The wind gently blows across your face, carrying with it the scent of spring flowers, the scent of pine branches.

For this moment, just breathe.

Just breathe in and out.

Is it possible to imagine that the breeze, gentle against your face, is whispering something in your ear? Beloved. Beloved. Beloved.

Just breathe in and out.

Breathe in and out.

Listen to the breeze.

Listen to God's Spirit, feel God's breath, pneuma, Ruah.

Listen to Ruah, whispering in your ear. Beloved. Beloved. Beloved.

"The spirit of God has made me,
and the breath of the Almighty gives me life." - Job 33:4

Breathe in and out.

Listen to God's Spirit, feel God's breath, pneuma, Ruah.