

Sermon: Epiphany IV at Christ Episcopal Church
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What happens when we come face to face with the divine? According to the Biblical record, when a human is contacted by the divine, either by an angel or by God Himself, the receiver of this visit is left in a less than desirable emotional state.

Take our first reading today. "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." (Deuteronomy 18:16)

This verse from Deuteronomy refers back to the reaction of the Israelites when God gave Moses the 10 commandments.

In Exodus 20:19, the Israelites spoke to Moses, saying: "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die."

This seemingly extreme reaction to God's presence is the norm, not the exception in Scripture. In fact, the reassuring words "Do not fear", is, interestingly enough, the most common phrase in all of Scripture. God regularly needs to remind us that being in His presence, though we might feel "undone", is nothing to be afraid of. Mary, the mother of Jesus, needed this reminder when the angel Gabriel visited her. And when the prophet Isaiah saw God on His throne, the angels needed to address his panic after he exclaimed, "I am ruined!" (Isaiah 6:5). What about the presence of God leads us to react in this way?

Today's Psalm speaks of the awe-inspiring qualities of God: he creates works filled with majesty and splendor and is filled with graciousness, compassion, faithfulness, justice, steadfastness, and holiness. The proximity of such a presence stands in direct contrast to who we are as humans. In the presence of the divine, we become, quite literally, undone. Any fragment of confidence in our meager human abilities disappears. Our pride is shattered, our defenses against God lie useless. Our human light is seen as a flickering candle flame in the presence of the brilliance of the sun.

When such an encounter with the divine happens, we are presented with two choices. The first is to turn away to the darkness and hide from this all-revealing light. The second choice is to allow our small selves to die and to instead become a vessel of the true light's brilliance. The second choice is clearly the more desirable of the two. Thus, being emotionally undone by the presence of God, though uncomfortable, is something we should welcome and search after. When we surrender to the life-altering power of God's presence, we become who we were born to be.

Though we may not see the throne of God like Isaiah did or witness His power come down on Mount Sinai, we have countless opportunities to come face to face with the transformative presence of the divine. The love of Christ, the divine light, resides in

every one of us. Most times, though, we are so caught up in worldly concerns or our own self-importance that we miss these opportunities.

In the Message translation of John 8:19, The Pharisees ask Jesus "Where is this so-called Father of yours?". To this, Jesus replies, "You're looking right at me and you don't see me." The Pharisees were so caught up in worldly concerns and the importance of their small selves that they didn't see the divine within Jesus. How often do we look right at Christ and not see Him?

There is a second reason we miss our opportunities to embrace the transforming power of the divine in our midst. In addition to getting caught up in worldly drama, we are also afraid of what others, let alone God, might see if they truly looked at us. The darkness within us recognizes the light, and knows it will be called forth and turned to nothingness if the light of love shines on it. And so, we are afraid. In the first act of Jesus' public ministry, recorded in our Gospel reading today (Mark 1: 23-24), an unclean spirit cries out "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." The unclean spirit was quick to recognize Jesus and knew that Jesus would be its undoing. Similarly, when we recognize the presence of God in our midst, the unclean parts of ourselves recognize the light and the call to be healed. Thus, out of fear, we are tempted to turn away from the light of God within others and hide in our inner darkness. It takes courage to open ourselves to the healing power of God to work through us. With a little bit of willingness, though, Christ can and will undo our small ego selves, revealing the hidden beauty of who we truly are.

Whether out of busyness or fear, the number of times I've looked at Christ and not seen Him are as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore. In fact, the first time I remember actually seeing Christ's presence fully alive in another came two days after my oldest son Brooks was born. It was sometime around 2 AM. My husband had gone home to sleep after being by my side for the last two nights. I was alone, exhausted, completely unqualified for motherhood, and scared out of my mind. If I was ever in a place of being in danger of hiding in my own darkness, that was it. And it was then that Brooks, resting in my arms after a late night snack, looked into my eyes.

It was the first time I had ever gazed into the eyes of another human being. I suppose up until that time, I was, like the Pharisees, too self-conscious and caught up in my ego self. I was also fundamentally insecure, afraid of what another might see if they truly looked. I would glance at another's face, in the general vicinity of the eyes, and then find something else to visually focus on. With my baby, I felt safe and let my guard down. I met his gaze, and held it. It was as if he was looking into my soul and I into his. I felt completely seen and loved, just as I was. That love drove my inner darkness away. As happy tears rolled down my cheeks, I knew I had bonded not with the personality, but with the soul of my son. I had "seen" him and he me. I had "seen" Christ.

When I "saw" Christ in my son that night, some part of my ego-self permanently died. I think this is true anytime we turn to the light and allow it to penetrate us to the core. When we meet the Christ within another face-to-face, we allow that Christ to look us in

the eye and call out the parts of us that are caught up in lies, insecurities, and fears. We allow Jesus to declare to our darkness, "Be silent and come out of him!"

Looking deeply into the eyes of another is one of the most direct ways to be undone by God's love. The Islamic poet and spiritual teacher Rumi once spent hours a day eye-gazing with another, and was utterly changed by the practice. As Will Johnson, a student of Rumi, explains,

"When eye contact between two people is initiated and maintained, an invisible energetic circuit is established between the two participants, dissolving the barriers that ordinarily separate them from each other, drawing them ever closer into a shared awareness of union.

-Will Johnson, an excerpt from The Spiritual Practices of Rumi

When we look into someone else's eyes and allow them to look deeply into ours, we shift our mode of operation from the brain, the home of our small ego self, to the heart, where the Holy Spirit resides. We shift from head knowledge to heart knowledge, also known as love. In our second reading today (1 Corinthians 8:1), Paul breaks down this difference between knowledge and love. He states that "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Knowledge is of the small self. It is true, in a sense, and has situational value. Knowledge is what I know of my children: their strengths and weaknesses, the inside jokes, the cowlicks in their hair. This knowledge is valuable. I know, for instance, to wash my kids' socks with odor eliminators or all the laundry smells like a swamp. These bits of knowledge appear very true on one level but they are impermanent and don't define who my sons truly are. The "truth" of my boys when they were babies (when their socks never smelled, unless I messed up a diaper change) is not the same as the "truth" of who they are now. And how much can anything be "true" if it is constantly changing? All this knowledge does for us, besides yielding better smelling laundry, is give us a false sense of confidence. It "puffs" us up.

In contrast, love knows. It is what looks into the soul of the other and sees the divine light shining forth. This is the truth that never changes. Brooks, at 13, will still occasionally look me intently in the eyes. And when I return his gaze now, I see the same light in him that I saw when he was just a couple days old. This miracle extends to any creation of God. When I look on anyone with love, I acknowledge their true nature and my own. And as I do so, we are both drawn closer to God.

Each day, we are presented with opportunities to see God and allow our false, small selves to die and to rise again with Christ to the truth of the pure goodness and power of the Holy Spirit living within us. This comes in the form of meeting the eyes of another human, fully taking in the beauty of nature, or surrendering to God in the quiet space of meditation. Regardless of form, in all cases we need to face the darkness within us, the darkness that wants us to avert our gaze, to not allow the divine light of another to "see" us. Despite how "real" our fears feel, they are nothing but smoke and mirrors. Who we really are, what another will see when they look into our core, is pure goodness, pure

love. Anything else is only what we cover up that light with. Who we are is not up to us. We are children of God and need to accept that. We don't determine our worth. However, we do determine how much we recognize it. How much, on this earth, we allow that true essence to be seen and will to see that essence in others IS up to us.

As God's love purifies and changes us, we increasingly become prophets of God to others. When we see the divine in others, look beyond the sometimes harsh exterior built for self-protection and call out the goodness hidden within them, we are acting as prophets, speaking on behalf of God the truth of God. A New Testament prophet is not a foreteller of the future but rather one who speaks to build up, cheer on, and comfort others. When we allow the Holy Spirit to clear our inner darkness and work within us, we speak and act with the authority given us by the Holy Spirit. We are healed to heal others, to bring others back in touch with their own true selves. The power of the divine, working through each of us, cuts through all of our facades and unites us in a oneness held together by the bonds of genuine, eternal love, the essence of who we are in Christ. This is what we are created for. To return to the realization of who we are in Christ and to bring others home along the way.

I invite you now to take a few moments and allow that piercing love to see through you and to call you out into the light. If you are comfortable, close your eyes and imagine Jesus looking at you, his gaze lovingly cutting through to your center, your gaze, fixed on Him, reminding you of your true nature. For the next three minutes, I invite you into a time of silent meditation to be fully known by God in whatever way feels most comfortable to you.

Amen.