



A LENTEN RETREAT: Week Two

The Gospel this week is the dramatic story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. Stories like this can be frustrating for us if we have never had a similar kind of experience of God. Sometimes we think that the only true or real experiences of God are dramatic experiences of God. Some people do have dramatic experiences of God, but not all people do. Most often our experience of God is rather ordinary but nonetheless an experience of God.

Fr. Ronald Rohlheiser tries to explain this in one of his columns, “one of the reasons why we struggle with faith is that God’s presence inside us and in our world is rarely dramatic, overwhelming, sensational, something impossible to ignore. God doesn’t work like that. Rather God’s presence, much to our frustration and loss of patience sometimes, is something that lies quiet and seemingly helpless inside us. It rarely makes a huge splash.

Because we are not sufficiently aware of this, we tend to misunderstand the dynamics of faith and find ourselves habitually trying to ground our faith on precisely something that is loud and dramatic. We are forever looking for something beyond what God gives us. But we should know from the very way God was born into our world, that faith needs to ground itself on something that is quiet and undramatic. Jesus, as we know, was born into our world with no fanfare and no power, a baby lying helpless in the straw, another child among millions. Nothing spectacular to human eyes surrounded his birth. Then, during his ministry, he never performed miracles to prove his divinity; but only as acts of compassion or to reveal something about God. Jesus never used divine power in an attempt to prove that God exists, beyond doubt. His ministry, like his birth, wasn’t an attempt to prove God’s existence. It was intended rather to teach us what God is like and that God loves us unconditionally.

Moreover, Jesus’ teaching about God’s presence in our lives also makes clear that this presence is mostly quiet and hidden, a plant growing silently as we sleep, yeast leavening dough in a manner hidden from our eyes, summer slowly turning a barren tree green, an insignificant mustard plant eventually surprising us with its growth, a man or woman forgiving an enemy. God, it seems, works in ways that are quiet and hidden from our eyes. The God that Jesus incarnates is neither dramatic nor splashy.

“Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.”

And there’s an important faith-lesson in this. Simply put, God lies inside us, deep inside, but in a way that’s almost non-existent, almost unfelt, largely unnoticed, and easily ignored. However, while that presence is never overpowering, it has within it a gentle, unremitting imperative, a compulsion towards something higher, which invites us to draw upon it. And, if we do draw upon it, it gushes up in us in an infinite stream that instructs us, nurtures us, and fills us with endless energy.

This is important for understanding faith. God lies inside us as an invitation that fully respects our freedom, never overpowers us; but also never goes away. It lies there precisely like a baby lying helpless in the straw, gently beckoning us, but helpless in itself to make us pick it up.

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES FOR THE WEEK

Experiences of God

Exodus 3:1-10

The Burning Bush

Judges 6:11-24

Call of Gideon

1Samuel 3:1-21

Call of Samuel

1Kings 19:9-13

Tiny whispering
sound

Isaiah 6:1-8

Call of Isaiah

Luke 2:1-20

Birth of Jesus

Luke 24:13-35

Road to Emmaus

John 20:11-18

Mary Magdalen

Use one of the forms of praying with Scripture from last week’s bulletin or simply read the above passages and hear God speaking to you of his love.

Each and every day there is a rich and complex world going on just beyond our veil of perception. In fact, literally anything could be happening right now without us knowing – invisible worlds colliding, unseen births, deaths, transformations. In fact, quantum physics suggests that the past, present and future is simultaneously occurring right now. What science does know only represents a minuscule fraction of what likely exists beyond our perception. The following points represents things that exist, but aren't visible to the naked human eye. Maybe science leads us here into the reality of God as something that exists but isn't visible to the human eye.

- Radio waves are one type of electromagnetic wave, ranging from about one foot long to several miles long. This type of electromagnetic frequency is used to transmit data and are used for satellites, computer networks and radio.
- Atoms are the smallest building blocks of matter and everything in the observable universe is made of trillions of atoms. Although atoms have never been seen with the human eye, they can be indirectly observed.
- Dark matter does not emit light or energy, yet it can be observed by calculating the motion of planets. About 80% of matter in the Universe is made up of dark matter.
- Air/Oxygen. OK, this is pretty obvious, but it's amazing that something we can't even see is responsible for keeping us alive.
- Ultraviolet light is a type of electromagnetic wave that is responsible for sunburn! Some animals, such as bumblebees, can see ultraviolet light, but we can't. The Hubble Space Telescope also uses ultraviolet light to see galaxies and stars in space.
- Gravity: We can measure it, but we can't observe it.
- Infrared: Whatever gives off heat radiates infrared waves, e.g. the human body. Infrared is a type of electromagnetic wave.
- The Mind: We can observe the brain and its chemical reactions, but thoughts are completely intangible to us.
- Emotions: We can see the expression on people's faces, observe their body language, and watch different parts of the brain react to feelings, but emotions are completely intangible.
- Quantum, or virtual particles exist on a subatomic level (i.e. they're smaller than atoms). Scientists theorize that they literally pop in and out of existence for brief moments of time. They can only be understood through magnetic or electrostatic forces.
- The Entire Universe: We know that it's out there. We can see a fraction of it with telescopes. But we can't see or even fathom the entire extent of the universe (and whether it actually ends). How mind-bending is that?

The invisible things have an effect in our everyday lives. Could the reality of what we can't see but know exists, be what helps us to recognize the God we can't see but know exists? The disciples have to wrestle with this reality on the top of the mountain in the transfiguration of Jesus. We have to wrestle with this reality in the world in which we live. But maybe those quiet, undramatic, and even invisible realities are what lead us to understand the presence of God in quiet, undramatic, and even invisible ways.

Then the LORD said: Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD; the LORD will pass by. There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the LORD—but the LORD was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake—but the LORD was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire—but the LORD was not in the fire; after the fire, a tiny whispering sound.

When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.