

The Face of God

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Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things. Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God. Every creature is a word of God.

—Meister Eckhart

Ancient Witness Luke 17: 20-21

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you."

You may have noticed that when I've done worship here I begin by saying, "God is with you." And the congregation responds, "And also with you." This is different from the usual greeting, which goes, "May God be with you," and this is very intentional. Because, it seems to me, this is our basic affirmation: The Sacred Presence is not something that may or may not be here or be there. It simply *is*. It is, in fact, embedded into the very fabric of reality. Isn't this the essence of our faith? That God is with us—with all people and all things? That, as the Psalmist wrote, there is no place we can go to flee from God's presence? If we ascend to heaven, God is there. If we make our bed in the land of the dead, God is there. If we take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there God shall hold us fast. (Psalm 139)

And so I begin worship with this affirmation, and I end with it, too. The priestly benediction of Aaron usually goes, "May God bless you and keep you. May God be kind and gracious to you. May God look upon you with favor and give you peace." And so I change that, too. Because according to the Reality to which the life and teaching of Jesus attests, there is no "may" about it. There are no "ifs, ands or buts." So I say, "May we know that God blesses us and keeps us. May we know God is kind and gracious to us. May we know God looks upon us—and all people—with favor. God's face shines upon us—and all things—continually. All the great spiritual teachers seem to say this. The Sufi mystic, Rumi (8th and 9th C.) put it this way: "Every instant a revelation from heaven comes to our inmost souls."

The problem isn't that God isn't present or isn't speaking; it's that we have ears but don't hear, and we have eyes but don't see. As Meister Eckhart (13th and 14th C.) said, "God is at home; it is we who have gone out for a walk."

And so this is what I want to talk about this morning: How can we see God's face that is always shining upon us? How can we wake up to the Sacred Reality that is embedded into the world? "The day of my spiritual awakening," said Mechthild of Magdeburg (13th C.), "was the day I saw, and knew I saw, all things in God and God in all things." And what I'm talking about is being able to see God in all things and all things in God, a spiritual awakening.

I remember hearing Andrew Greeley give a lecture once years ago, and he said something that has stayed with me. He said that the main job of the preacher is not to give an experience of the divine to the listeners, because everyone already has these experiences. The task of the preacher is to help people become aware of their contact with God, aware of their divine experiences that they are having all the time—to bring these closer to the surface of their conscious awareness.

Jesus, it seems to me, was all about this. He experienced being in a deep, intimate union with the Divine, and he wanted others to experience the same thing. And when Jesus talked about this state of being in contact with this Mystery, which is God, he mostly used parables to try to describe it. And his main image was that of a kingdom or an empire that was quite unlike any we could imagine. It was an un-kingdom or an un-empire.

And so in Luke we hear Jesus say, “The kingdom of God will not come in such a way as to be seen. No one will say, ‘Look, there it is!’ Because it is within you.”

In other words, this kingdom is here and now, right under your nose. (We should remember that Jesus is talking to his opponents, making his statement even more remarkable.) This realm, this state of union and contact with God, is within any person. The problem is you don’t see it.

The extra-canonical Gospel of Thomas says something similar: “God’s imperial rule or kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don’t see it,” and (113) “If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you.” (70) So the task is to look within oneself to discover our connection with the Holy that is already here. “The kingdom is inside you and outside you. When you know yourselves... you will understand that you are children of God. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty.” (3)

This view of the kingdom of God is to be found in the present moment is remarkably similar to the Buddhist idea of nirvana, the state of oneness with all things that is found only in the present moment. And the goal of Buddhism can be seen as very similar to the goal of Christianity: to be able to get beyond all the distractions of this world and to become aware of this kingdom, this reign of love and compassion right here and right now, and then to live in this awareness. It is to become awake to the presence within us and among us.

There’s a story of a fisherman who gets up before dawn as he had done so many times before. And as he is walking along in the dark the shoreline he trips over something. So he goes back and feels around and finds this bag of pebbles in the sand. He picks it up and takes it with him to his boat, occasionally taking out a pebble and throwing it into the ocean. Soon the sun starts to come up on the horizon, and he looks down at the few remaining pebbles in the bag. And he discovers that they are not pebbles at all, but precious gems!

And this is the human experience, isn’t it? We go through most of our lives throwing our days around as if they were pebbles until we awaken, until it dawns on us that each day, each moment is a gem beyond measure. It’s never too late to discover a life that is full and abundant.

Here’s an eighth century Zen story:

When Hui-Hai was a young monk and first came to the great master Ma-Tzu, the master asked him, "What have you come here for?"

Hui-Hai said, "I have come seeking Buddha's teaching." "What a fool you are!" Ma-Tzu said. "You have the greatest treasure in the world deep inside you, and you go around asking other people for help. What good is this? I have nothing to give you." Hui-Hai bowed and said, "Please master, tell me what this treasure is." Ma-Tzu said, "Where is your question coming from? This is your treasure. It is precisely what is asking the question at this very moment. Everything is stored in this precious treasure house of yours. It is there at your disposal, you can use it as you wish, nothing is lacking. Why then are you running away from yourself and seeking for things outside?" Hearing these words, Hui-Hai realized his own mind. Beside himself with joy, he bowed deeply to his master.

Many of us have lots of questions. Especially in the face of greed and corruption of the wealthy and powerful, in the face of war and the destruction of our environment, in the face of suffering of the poor and weak. Sometimes the questions emerge from our deep human hunger for compassion and justice. Where is your question coming from? *This* is your treasure. It is within you.

And you know, often when we go through crisis and hardship, we may feel anything but peaceful and whole. But times like these can actually help us focus on the present moment. When our ordinary, routine lives are interrupted, there is an opportunity to become more alive to the "kingdom within" us this very instant. There are times when we pause, not to become numb to the pain, but to look more deeply within. Times of crisis can help us grow deeper in a spiritual sense, more aware of the realm of the Sacred that is right under our noses, here and now. We become more attuned to *the preciousness of life*.

There's an old story of a pupil who asks the wise rabbi about a passage in the Bible, in the Book of Deuteronomy, which is part of the Torah, the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures. There is a sentence there that says to "Lay these words upon your heart." The words, which sum up the fundamental belief of the Hebraic tradition, are these: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one; And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.'" (Deuteronomy 6: 4-6). And so the pupil asks the rabbi, 'Why does it tell us to lay these words *upon* our heart? Why doesn't it tell us to put them *in* our heart?' And the rabbi answers, "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and the words can't get it in. So we must put them on top of the heart. And there they stay. There they stay until someday, when the heart breaks, they fall in."

And so all the teaching of the faith traditions, the words and message of Jesus, they lay upon our hearts. And often, only when we experience suffering and our hearts are broken that they fall in. They become real within us.

The Buddhists have this great metaphor of the finger pointing to the moon. One could say that our tradition, the Bible, even Jesus, himself, are like the finger pointing us toward the moon. And often, we make a mistake when we focus on just the finger, and miss the moon. Because it's all about the moon. It's about the experience of the kingdom that is within us and among us right now. Knowledge and concepts are fine, but faith is ultimately about *experience*. Jesus said, "Look, it's not about me. Don't call me good. It's about the Sacred Reality. It's about the moon!"

Because in the midst of suffering there can be life, and in the midst of comfort there can be no life.

In fact, it is suffering and communion with those who suffer that can help lead us to actual inner experience, to the face of God, to true abundant life and happiness. It can lead us to an awareness that the kingdom of God is in the here and now, in the present moment, and that every moment is a divine miracle, a precious gem.

Those who have been marginalized and degraded, exploited and oppressed, those who are “acquainted with grief” can help us discover life. And, if we listen to them and enter into their suffering, they can help us discover the sacredness and holiness in the heart of each moment.

In 1987, John Jackson was working as a photographer for the Indianapolis Star and he was sent to Ecuador to cover the earthquake that devastated the country and caused immense suffering. And he wrote this:

The line was long but moving briskly. And in that line at the very end, stood a young girl about twelve years of age. She waited patiently as those at the front of that very long line received a little rice, some canned goods or a little fruit. Slowly but surely she was getting closer to the front of that line. Closer to the food. From time to time she would glance across the street. She did not notice the growing concern on the faces of those distributing the food. The food was running out. Their anxiety began to show. But she did not notice. Her attention seemed always to focus on three figures under the trees across the street. At long last she stepped forward to get her food but the only thing left was one lonely banana. The workers were almost ashamed to tell her that that was all that was left. She did not seem to mind. In fact, she seemed genuinely happy to get that solitary banana. Quietly she took the precious gift and ran across the street where three small children waited, perhaps her sisters and a brother. Very deliberately she peeled the banana and very carefully divided the banana into three equal parts placing the precious food in the eager hands of those three younger ones. One for you, one for you, and one for you. She then sat down and licked the inside of that banana peel. I swear I saw the face of God!

Sisters and Brothers, the face of God shines upon us and within us all!

Amen.