

Thy Presence My Light
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
March 10, 2024, Fourth Sunday in Lent
Psalms 107; Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-17, 19-21

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Fourth Sunday in Lent. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and that our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

The old song says to know know know you is to love love love you, but it is actually the other way around. Love, and then you will know. Believe a person is lovable, and then you will come to understand how it is true.

Jesus commanded us to do this, loving our neighbor, the complete stranger and even our enemy that way. Jesus knew it was hard, but also that it's the most powerful way to create the realm of God on earth, a realm of compassion, nonviolence and kindness.

Church is our training ground. We practice the policy of love first, ask questions later. We make this the most loving community we can, and then we take that transforming light of love out into the world.

So please do this again today by the simple act of greeting those around you with an open heart, especially those you don't know well, both in person and on Zoom.

Call to Worship We are more than half way through the Lenten wilderness. The purpose of wilderness trials is to teach us to keep turning to the Spirit, like the cat that has only one way to escape danger, but it always works. Lent helps us learn to go to the Spirit the way a cat goes up a tree. It helps us escape danger and endure trials, and over time, our whole life moves to that higher level.

Thomas Keating says, "A restructuring of consciousness takes place which empowers one to perceive, relate and respond to everyday life with increasing sensitivity to the divine presence in, through and beyond everything that happens."

Let us practice entering into the awareness of the Spirit's presence now as we worship together...

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Psalm 107 sums up the quintessential Lenten experience.

Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way;
hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.
Then they cried to God in their trouble,
and God delivered them from their distress...
Some were sick through their wrongful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
Then they cried to God in their trouble,
and God saved them from their distress;
God sent out the word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.

The purpose of Lent is to bring into our awareness our soul's hunger and thirst and yearning for the Promised Land. Lenten scriptures remind us of our lost or wrongful ways and the suffering they are causing us. The purpose of Lent is to teach us to do what Jesus did in his wilderness, which was to turn to God in every trial and temptation. Not only does turning to the Spirit help us through a particular struggle, but if we make a practice of it, it leads to our inner and outer transformation. We come out of the wilderness like Jesus, full of the Spirit's power to shine light and love into the world.

The Psalm applies to every human's experience in life, but it also had in mind today's strange story of the people of Israel in the wilderness. The people said they had no food or water, and yet they also said the food they had was miserable, so apparently they were exaggerating their misery. It is like the old joke, "The food here is terrible, and the portions are so small!"

One wise therapist I know holds a tissue box in front of her patients' eyes so that it is all they can see, a kind of binocular trick where you fill your vision with something that is not really as big as it looks but you cannot see any way around it.

What we see or how we see in our mind's eye makes a huge difference to our health and happiness. The wisdom of today's strange wilderness story is that the negativity of the people's way of looking at their situation leads directly to the serpents or fiery angels, it leads to suffering and losing life. The cure is to see the same things differently. The people look at an image of

what afflicts them and see through it God's loving, healing, transforming power, and they die to their old ways and gain new life.

There is a fable that contemplative Christian teachers love to tell about transforming our perception. Once upon a time there was a community of acorns living at the base of a great oak tree. They were proud of what they were, and kept their little caps on straight, and kept their shells glossy and hard.

One day a passing blue jay accidentally dropped an acorn into their midst. It was missing its cap. It had a dirty, scarred shell and smelled of rot. The shiny acorns kept their distance as it told its story. It ended by pointing up at the soaring oak, with wonder and awe, saying, "We. . . are. . . that!" The other acorns scoffed at it.

The old acorn insisted, "All we have to do is let ourselves fall into the dirt until we soften and crack open our shell and we become oaks."

"Who would want to do that?" they yelled indignantly. "Then we wouldn't be acorns!"

[adapted from Jacob Needleman and Cynthia Bourgeault]

Today's gospel passage says, "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light." The shiny acorns think their glossy coats are the greatest light and life. They think that becoming a rotten, cracked acorn is death, and of course they are right. It is the death that leads to life, the darkness that leads to light that Jesus and all wisdom traditions say we need to undergo. To move to a higher developmental stage or a deeper spiritual state, we need to die to the old self and allow our truer, God-given self to come into being.

The great Sufi contemplative poet, Jalaluddin Rumi spoke to shiny acorn type people saying,

The Mystery of "Die before you Die" is this:
That the gifts come after your dying and not before.
Except for dying, you artful schemer,
No other skill impresses God.

The Gospel passage says that we need to lift Christ up the way Moses lifted the image of the serpent angel before the eyes of the dying. We need to fill our vision with the love and life and light in Christ. We have to let go of our old self-concern, just let it die the way an acorn lets its glossy shell die, because if we hold onto it, we keep ourselves from growing into the greater,

endless flow of the Spirit that is hidden in every present moment like an oak tree right before our eyes that we fail to recognize as our true potential and calling.

The Gospel says that those who do evil separate themselves from the light, but the Greek root of the word translated as evil is not what we picture. The Greek root is *ponos*, and its meaning is intense desire and the great trouble and pain that come from that desire, or in the case of the acorns' desire, the stunted, stuck refusal to fulfill the Spirit's calling. That's what evil means.

It is so hard to let go of harmful desires, or even see them sometimes. All the Israelites wanted was better food—it's hard to see the harm in that until you realize that the desire was filling their vision and blinding them to the one hope they had for survival in the wilderness, the source of all they had. Their focus cuts them off from the gratitude and trust they could have felt instead.

It is hard to let go of our way of seeing things, but the good news is that we do not have to do anything more than that. The Spirit transforms and fills us, if we can let go and open just a crack and give it room to flow within us.

This letting go and self-emptying is that Greek word *kenosis* again. As I said earlier in Lent, it leads to *metanoia*, the expansion of our vision, the transformation of the eyes of the heart to see anew. *Metanoia* means literally to change and go beyond where our heart, mind and soul are now.

This is exactly what we train ourselves to do in Centering Prayer and all forms of contemplative practice, *kenosis* and *metanoia*, self-emptying and new vision.

There have been times in my life when I have envied other religions. I envied Buddhism its meditation and mindfulness, but then I discovered that Christianity had those, too.

I envied Taoism its perception of a natural, sacred way flowing through everything in the universe, including through us, offering to fill us with its power and virtue and carry us in its flow, the right path through any situation, enabling us to be one with all things and bring the world around us into the natural order.

Taoism is a little like the religion of the Force in Star Wars, and I used to envy that, too. I wanted to be Yoda when I grew up, after a few hundred years of intense Jedi training.

But then I came to understand Christianity more deeply and I saw that the Tao or the Force is part of our tradition, too.

The Tao means literally “the Way.” The Way was the first name of the followers of Jesus before the word Christian was invented. Jesus says he *is* the way. To fill our vision with Christ’s light, to transform the eyes of our heart so that we fill them with the presence of the Spirit, is to be in the Tao, to be grounded in inner peace, full of life death cannot destroy, one with all creation and on the path to be our truest self, fulfilling our calling to serve our time and place with the gifts the Spirit gives us to share.

I still love other religions, they all have their own beautiful ways of framing their wisdom, but I no longer envy their meditative or mystical dimensions. The contemporary masters and teachers of Centering Prayer have completely revived the ancient Christian contemplative tradition and added to it powerful insights from the sciences. We have everything we need now to “facilitate the process of inner transformation” as Thomas Keating says.

And the heart of it is so simple, just the slightest of motions, just opening our clenched hands and letting them flatten out, just letting go of our anxious, busy thoughts, one by one, letting go of everything else we are straining our eyes to see and instead turning our vision to the presence of the Spirit that is always here, within and around us, and letting that be the light by which we see everything else.

The way through the wilderness is not to crave or cling like the Israelites, it is to let go the way you would let go of a dock to float down a river’s current, let go, and enter the Spirit’s flow, and be changed, and with your changed vision, find the path to the Promised Land that the earth could be.

Let us pray in silence, aware of our thoughts but letting them be and turning our gaze deeper within us, below the thoughts, to the peaceful depths where the Spirit’s light shines. Turn gently from every thought to the quiet deep within you. Let us pray in silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Peace and Reconciliation
Picasso’s
Dove on an Olive Branch