

Sunday, February 7, 2016
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Embracing the Light”

Have you ever seen someone who was glowing?

An excited child, a bride, a businessperson who has just closed a great deal, an artist, a musician?

Something happens to transform their face.

A light seems to shine from within.

These are people who have had a brush with the divine.

They have experienced that deeply moving moment when life seems perfect, when their gifts have served them well, when everything seems aligned.

No one stays in that glowing state forever, but the memory of the transcendent moment remains and creates a yearning that can only be fulfilled by another divine encounter.

Someone once said that faith is how we live between mountaintop experiences.

In today’s passage from Exodus, Moses glows after his encounters with God.

The people are initially afraid, so that Moses veils his shining countenance.

But he takes the veil off when he is in the presence of God.

I like to imagine that the people would eventually get used to seeing Moses’ shining face and that it would inspire them to get closer to God themselves.

In Luke’s account, the disciples are witnesses to Jesus’ transfiguration...*and while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.*

Having been filled with the Holy Spirit – in touch with the divine – Jesus is transformed, perhaps having been comforted or reassured in some way.

God is there.

Jesus is not alone.

We too have an opportunity to experience the presence of God – but we must seek it and we must be open to it.

We must be willing to separate ourselves from our daily busyness and enter into a space where God’s grace can flow.

There are a number of spiritual disciplines that can be employed to help us move to this place of encounter.

The first is prayer.

Prayer has been used since creation was formed as a way for humans to communicate with God.

People pray for many reasons: to seek guidance from God; to assess the will of God; to enjoy a time of companionship with God; to give thanks; to demonstrate respect; to find out what God's expectations are; and to ask God for help.

Bishop John Spong suggests that we make a conscious choice to transform our prayers from childish pleas to the "Santa Claus" God to "a meditation and petitionary prayer seeking a divine force flowing through us – a spirit that will transform our way of being."

No matter how we pray or even why, prayer is a spiritual discipline that enhances our lives and brings us closer to God.

Other possible spiritual disciplines might include meditating, reading, walking, fasting and service.

I would contend that each one of these efforts must start with and be rooted in prayer to be transformative.

When we encounter God we come away changed.

With that change comes responsibility.

One author suggests that "the meaning or the word responsibility becomes clearer if we break it apart in a way which makes its implicit verb explicit: responsibility is the "ability to respond."

When we say, "I am responsible," we're actually saying: "I am able to respond."

He continues: "The Latin roots of the word respond include the ideas of answering and promising.

In a sense, "to respond" is to answer a calling meaningfully and with commitment.

Responsibility is a thoughtful, committed, and enacted "yes" to a calling."

Responding to God's grace ought to be the motivating factor for how we conduct our lives.

In my reading this week, I came upon a short essay on living the Christian virtues.

The author, Albert Edward Day, pointed out that Jesus was the most wisely disciplined person in history.

By living disciplined lives Day contends that we are continuing our remembrance of Jesus.

What better time than the start of Lent to review those goals to which we might strive.

The disciplines that make up a Christian life include:

Obedience: "Thy will be done." Theologian Paul Tillich said that Jesus lived in unbroken unity with God and yet sought nothing for himself by that unity."

Simplicity: Jesus lived simply – there was no effort to make an impression; he refused the spectacular; he spoke the language of the people; he kept silent when he did not know the answers.

Humility: 'take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart.'

Frugality: Frugal in food he fasted long days in the wilderness. Frugal in sleep, he spent whole nights in prayer alone with God. Frugal in personal relationships, he loved people but could get along without them if his truth offended them.

Generosity: He gave everything to God, everything! His days, his nights, his dreams and deeds, his labors and his life itself, were God's. He gave himself to people, sharing with them his truth, ministering to their souls, healing their sickness, listening to their questions.

He had compassion for them.

Truthfulness: Deceit, evasion, double-talk, ambiguity, exaggeration, flattery, nor guile ever appeared in his life.

Purity: No mixed motives, no service adulterated by sly self-interest, nothing that did not fit the concept of God-likeness. He said, "Blessed are the pure in heart" and he lived that.

Charity: Paul's definition of charity had Jesus as its model: gentleness, graciousness, quick forgiveness, bountifulness, courtesy, self-sacrifice, universal good will, channeling of God's love toward all people.

Day concluded his essay with this: Of all these disciplines, Jesus was the perfect incarnation. Nor were these superlative qualities of life sheer native endowment. They were his because God was in him, true! But God was in him because he did what the rest of us must do—by dedication and discipline keep one's life open to God."

My friends, it is important that we seek opportunities to be in God's presence.

We must labor at being Christians in this troubled world.

It is our responsibility – our response to God – to strive to live a virtuous life.

Today, we have shared a communion meal in remembrance of the fact that Jesus Christ died for us.

Let us also remember that Jesus Christ lived for us – modeling what a holy life might look like.

We have the directions.

We have the materials.

The challenge is to build a life of character.

When we take this challenge seriously we find ourselves living in the light – the brilliant light of God's love.

Embrace that light.

Own it.

Reflect it onto the people around you.

Let this season of Lent be one that changes you, that brings you closer to God and to all of the things that God loves.