

WHERE TWO OR THREE

Psalm 50: 1-6
Mark 9: 2-9

Faith Community
March 2, 2003

Introduction

Almost every Sunday we begin worship here by saying that we are coming into the presence of God to worship and praise God. Are there times when you come here and don't feel like you are in the presence of God? Do you sometimes wonder if God is really here with us when we worship?

Maybe you've had the experience of seeing a movie or play and really being moved by it. It was powerful experience for you. Later when you are talking with a friend they say they saw the same show, but they didn't get anything out of it. You wonder how that can happen – how can something be so moving for one person and mean nothing to someone else?

The same kind of thing can happen in worship. Maybe your friend who went to the movie was worried about something else and had trouble concentrating. Maybe some part of the film turned them off, and that spoiled the rest of the movie for them. Maybe you were in just the right state of mind to be moved by the message of the film. There are lots of variables, of course.

I

Our gospel reading this morning was the transfiguration of Jesus. The Greek word for the transfiguration is *metemorphothe*, the word we get metamorphosis from. It is Jesus' transfiguration and it is Jesus' transformation.

Jesus change is only in his outward appearance, he isn't changed inwardly. His clothes became whiter than Clorox could ever get them. Inside he is the same person.

Jesus has gone up this high mountain with Peter and James and John. When Jesus turns bright white, Moses – the great lawgiver - and Elijah – the great prophet - appear.

Peter is so moved that he cries out, "It good for us to be here. Let's build three dwellings here – one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for you Jesus." Then there is a booming voice from heaven, which says the same thing it did at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him." Then it's all over and they head down the mountain.

It has been a mystical experience, and each of the disciples has reacted differently.

II

Did you know that one third of all American's say they have had a mystical experience. That's forty seven million people. Of those, about fifteen million people report having an other-worldly feeling of union with a divine being.

If you're like me you have trouble comprehending what Jesus' transfiguration must have been like, but lots of our fellow American's have a good sense of what it might have been.

III

Whatever else it was, this was an experience of worship in the presence of God. God was present during that experience, but each of them sensed it in a different way.

For Peter it was important to build some sort of monument, put up three dwellings for each of the great people seen there. The other disciples apparently stood back silently, dumbstruck in awe of what was happening.

When we are in the presence of God people will understand it differently. Some will even miss it altogether.

Jesus promised that wherever two or three are gathered together in his name he would be present with us there. That means when we gather for worship on Sunday morning Christ is present with us.

We don't hear that booming voice from heaven to let us know, but we trust that he is with us. Two people will have two different responses to that presence. Some may miss it altogether. Where one person may leave moved by this time together, another may find that he simply feels better, a third may have been distracted the whole time, another may have been too tired to concentrate.

One of the greatest compliments I have ever received came from a man in this church. As he came out of church one Sunday, he told me he had gotten tickets to a major Christian gospel concert. He had been looking forward to that time, and to being moved by all the speakers and bands that would be there.

That Sunday morning he said, "I came away from that event last night unmoved. All the music and the crowds of people who believe like I do and the speakers didn't touch me. But something you said in the first part of your sermon today brought tears to my eyes."

I am sure many people were moved by that gospel concert, even though he wasn't. And I'm sure lots of other people were unmoved by my sermon which meant so much to him. Each of us responds differently to being in the presence of God.

A great deal of how we respond depends on our state of mind at the time. Were we fully present in that moment or were we worried by some other events of our lives?

IV

We also experience the presence of God in different ways. Some sense it in the word spoken. A statement or an example or a question in a sermon might make us aware that God is here with us.

Sometimes we feel God in the elements of communion. Sometimes we sense God's presence in the beautiful music of the choir. Sometimes we sense it in the warmth of people gathered with us.

Frederick Buechner writes of going to a friend's church for worship, very much needing to sense God's presence in his life. The sermon that morning was a polemic against war and violence. He agreed with what his friend was preaching, but it didn't help him feel God's presence.

After the service his friend came to him and gave him a bear-like hug. They talked for some time. Buechner wrote that while he wasn't moved by the sermon, his friend's warm embrace and caring gave him just what he needed.

We sense God's presence in different ways at different times in our lives. Sometimes it is there and we miss it altogether because of what's going on in our lives.

V

God's presence isn't always an emotional experience. Sometimes God comes to us through a rational thought that makes a difference in our lives. Sometimes there is some part of the service that pulls me to make a definite change in my life - it is a well thought-out decision to live my life closer to what I understand Christ wants me to do.

Just as God doesn't always reveal himself in a booming voice and a spectacular miracle, so God doesn't always touch us through an emotional experience. In fact, sometimes the emotional experiences are short-lived, while the more rational are long lasting.

Sometimes our sense of God's presence is an understanding that we are not alone, or that we can handle a situation with prayer. Often it is a knowledge that we are cared for by someone far greater than we are. Sometimes we know God's presence through a firm conviction that we stand on solid ground, and that we will be OK.

To experience the presence of God is not always an emotional experience.

Conclusion

Jesus promised that wherever two or three are gathered together in his name, he would be present there with them. That means that Christ is here with us - among us.

God's presence isn't always an earth-shattering event. It isn't always an emotional high. We don't even sense it all the time. But God is here.

As Peter said at the Transfiguration, "It is good for us to be here." It makes a difference.

Amen