

5 Lent Year B
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Episcopal Church at Yale
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Present to the Presence

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Psalm 51; Hebrews 5: 5-10; John 12: 20-33

REFLECTION:

Welcome to spring. The thing I love about this season is that it's so sensuous. It invites each of our senses to awaken, to come alive – we smell the newly thawed earth, our eyes feast on the daffodil bulbs poking through the soil, our ears delight at the chirping of birds. No wonder we talk about the “spring” in our step. It's like the whole earth can't quite contain herself – spring starts to waft out, peek out, and call out, nudging each of our senses awake, spreading a perfume of hope in the air, as we walk our Lenten path to the cross, and to the empty tomb.

As we gather for worship, let's cast off all the cares and preoccupations we've brought here tonight, and settle into the present moment – a liminal space where the veil between the world of physicality and that of the spirit is very thin.

And as we do, let's listen to the words of Welsh poet and scholar Esther de Waal:

*“We breathe a new air,
No longer cold with seeming death.
The flowers respond
To the strengthening Sun, your light.
So may our hearts respond to your love and grace.
The birds break into song and call us to your praise.
So may our hearts give praise at all aspects of our lives.
The frozen air and water melt to new life:
So may our hardened hearts be softened
To gentleness and love.
We are overwhelmed with images, symbols,
Confirmations of your resurrecting, your enlivening.”*

SERMON:

*“Create in me a clean heart, O God
And renew a right spirit within me.”*

We know that the greatest gifts of childhood include a sense of wonder and awe, an unbridled curiosity about anything and everything, and a firm rooting in the present moment, milking it for all it's worth. So, I'm always amused when parents begin speculating about where these early fixations might lead. We ask children, over and over, *“What do you want to be when you grow up?”*

Sometimes that's encouragement, assuring children they can be anything they wish for. And sometimes we're so preoccupied by the idol of achievement, we forget that in God's economy, at any moment, we're each quite enough; and that fulfillment and joy are not states to be striven for, but rather to be found in simply being, of living, as Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, in the *“... present moment, wonderful moment.”*

No wonder Jesus said, *“If you would enter the kingdom of heaven, you must become like children.”*

In many ways this tension between the now and the not yet defines the trajectory of each of our spiritual journeys. That's why, as T. S. Eliot famously wrote in his poem *Little Gidding*,

*“We shall not cease from exploration.
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”*

I often think the most significant shift in my own spiritual journey came when I was a mere child of 8. Growing up in an impoverished, crowded, emotionally challenging home, I travelled the entire earth on the pages of novels, dreaming of a better life. And the only quiet place I could find for these fictions were the empty pews of St. James, our local Catholic church. I spent many afternoons sitting in that cavernous, perfectly quiet space, praying for God to transport me to another life, with less preoccupied parents, kinder teachers, safer streets, a loving circle of friends. And if it's not too much trouble, God, how about a bright red bike?

But day after day, week after week, watching the sunlight descend down the stained glass windows, breathing in the sweet smell of incense and candles, gazing on the beautiful statues of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, my mind and my heart turned less to the future, and more to the richness of the present moment. Without trying, I was discovering a deep serenity, a presence that meant I was not alone, and then... a certainty of being loved in a way I'd never experienced before.

Gradually, I came to realize that I didn't need to keep inviting, cajoling, dragging or begging God to come into my life, hoping for God to construct some future in which all my dreams were fulfilled; but rather I began to feel that God's richest gifts, the gifts of companionship, acceptance, safety, and overwhelming love, were right there in that pew. And that these gifts were infinitely more valuable than any mere things, or even

any possible future. Although, being 8, I was still sure it would be nice to have that bright red bike.

It took me many years to put this epiphany into words, and I found them in the work of contemplative prayer guru Thomas Keating. *“God always dwells within us; Keating wrote, “we simply need to consent to God’s presence... We’re all like localized vibrations of the infinite goodness of God’s presence. So, just like God’s nature, love is our very nature as well. Love is our first, middle, and last name,” Keating concludes. “Love is all.”*

Those seeds of awareness that God truly abides within me, and that I am truly God’s beloved, even if I couldn’t articulate them, were completely life changing for me as a child. They protected me through more trials than I care to describe. In fact, over and over, they saved my life.

They also drew me, as an adult, to abandon the religion of my youth and embrace the Episcopal Church, a tradition that is skeptical of the utility of guilt as a prod toward faith, that celebrates the goodness of God’s creation, including our bodies that are *“...wonderfully made...”,* and the miracle of the incarnation – God planting the seeds of divinity and connection in, and between, each and every one of God’s beloved and beautifully diverse children.

This reality of God’s loving presence in our lives holds tremendous power. It changes our consciousness, as we grasp the terrible truth that, beyond ourselves, God actually dwells in each other person we know and care about. God dwells in the people we don’t particularly care for, and even in those we fear or despise. God dwells in people all around the globe; and in creation itself; all inextricably interconnectedness by a divine love that binds us together as surely as blood and bone, muscle and sinew.

This is the significance of the prophet Jeremiah’s words we just heard, marking a fundamental shift of the covenant God makes with God’s people. Listen. *“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with (you)... It will not be like the covenant I made with (your) ancestors when I took you by the hand and led you out of Egypt... but this is the (new) covenant I will make... I will put the law within you and I will write it on your hearts; and I will be your God and you shall be my people.”* I will put the law within you and I will write it on your hearts.

If God’s loving presence is so powerful, God grants us an equally powerful capacity, the freedom to choose in any moment whether we will embrace the loving God written on our hearts, or to reject that same God who lives within us. The miracle though, is that however and how often we choose, either way – to consent to or reject God’s loving presence, God never deserts us, but continues quietly tilling the soil of our hearts of flesh, even as we work our hardest to turn them into hearts of stone. As Jeremiah puts it, *“They shall know me, from the least to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”*

Embracing the reality and power of God’s loving presence, which constantly transcends our human frailty, is exactly what this earth of ours needs today. It is literally a matter of life and death, the power to save our lives, as Jesus reminds us, even as we lose them.

Jesus knew this, even as twenty-something Etty Hillesum knew this, as she journalled on her way to Auschwitz. *“There is a really deep well inside me,”* Hillesum writes. *“And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there, too ... And that is all we can manage these days, and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves.”*

And now, as we enter our reflection rooms, let’s ask the question, *“How does the reality of God’s loving presence within me make a difference in how I live my life?”*