

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Second Sunday after Pentecost

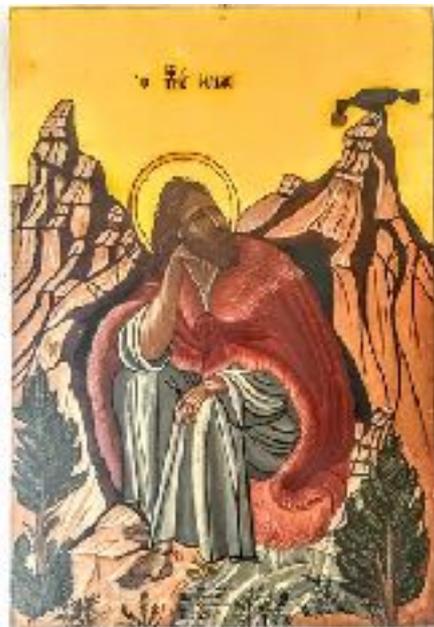
“An Assuring and Unifying Divine Presence”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Hebrew Scripture: I Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a

Christian Scripture: Galatians 3:23-29

Sunday, 23 June 2019



Perhaps we should take time in worship, perhaps during an entire sermon series, for each of you to come to the chancel and tell of a personal experience you have had with the divine - a time when you felt the presence of God in your midst. I know many of you would have rich and varied experiences to share with us - for you are a beautiful and a faithful people.



I have already told you when in Chile, in a Catholic cathedral, I encountered for the first time a physical Jesus, battered, bruised, and bloodied. I said, “That is who I want to serve for the rest of my life”. Yes, for me, it was quite profound.



A second notable experience I had was living in the Kingdom of Lesotho in southern Africa. For those of you who do not know, Lesotho is called the ‘Mountain Kingdom’. A mountain range covers two-thirds of the country. Interesting fact: The Kingdom of Lesotho has the *highest lowest* point in any country in the world (its lowest point is higher than another country’s lowest point).

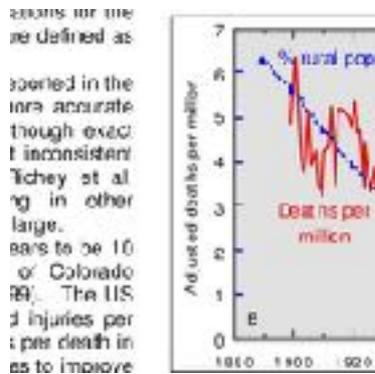


I was deep in the midst of a two-week intensive immersion experience with a homestay family. After the end of the long hot humid day, I decided to take some time away from my hosts and hike to the top of a huge mountain plateau that stood as a massive, imposing and seductive backdrop behind the family compound. I hiked for a good hour or two. I reached the top and I sat on the edge of a precipice.



Across the horizon a thunderstorm flashed. I could see lighting strikes for dozens, if not hundreds, of miles. I slipped into what I can only call a ‘trance’ and I felt, I know it sounds trite, like I no longer existed as ‘Scott Couper’, a young man travelling in foreign country. But I felt like I was one with everything. The rain drops, the clouds, the sky the lightning. I felt like was in, and in fact, the mountain itself, forever. It was the first time, and perhaps the only time, I had an out of body

experience (and no, I had nothing to smoke) and I felt as if I was God's creation and God's creation was me - all of it.



As I returned several hours later, I could not believe how worried my homestay family became. I was astounded by the degree to which this family, who I had just met, cared so much for me and were so genuinely concerned, even cut to the heart, by my absence. This is when I learned another interesting fact about Lesotho: Lesotho has the highest *per capita* lightning strikes of any country in the world. Because there are no trees, there are very high mountains, and frequent thunderstorms, dozens and dozens of people are struck dead by lightning each year, mostly herders who are exposed in the elements.



From our Hebrew reading, we hear of how Elijah experienced God from a place of desperation. Elijah, perhaps from fatigue, perhaps from want of food and drink, sensed the presence of God.



Elijah must have experienced some traumatic weather event; wind and lightning encircled him. A lightning strike perhaps started a brush fire. Then there was a geologic event, an earthquake. Yet, in these phenomena God did not dwell. I wonder if God was not sensed by Elijah in these events because he had sorta had enough with drama; he wanted no more of the supernatural, no more of the dramatic, no more of the high stakes brinkmanship with which he found himself so

recently with the wife of King Ahab, Jezebel, and all the false prophets of Ba'al. After all, after fleeing from Jezebel, he said to God, "It is enough now, Lord. Take my life" (I Kings 19:4). It was only in what was described as a "low murmuring sound", what some translations describe as a "still small voice", or "a gentle whisper", that Elijah sensed a communication with the divine (I Kings 19:12).



This small voice of God compelled Elijah to conclude his solo forty day and night retreat of isolation and return to, where?, the city. To people. To a community of faith.



In our Christian scripture reading, we have not the experience of God *described*, but rather its *aftereffects*. How do people encounter the risen Christ? Well, some on the road to Damascus when upon reaching a destination the stranger breaks bread. Or, perhaps we get

knocked off an ass, on our ass. Like Paul. Perhaps, it is on retreat, in fear, like Elijah, and thus perhaps very undramatic, but nonetheless potently. Perhaps it was with others, in worship, like on Pentecost, celebrated two weeks ago, and thus it may have been dramatic.



More often than not, an encounter with the divine is a deeply personal and existential experience, one which shakes one to the core - no one else can experience it like you can and did. Yet, our Christian scripture teaches us that though our experiences with God may be quite varied, the resulting product should be unity.



Listen to the words of Paul: “For through faith you are all sons and daughters of God in union with Christ Jesus [...]. There is no such thing

as Jew and Greek, slave nor freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).



Friends, when do I experience God now? To be honest, though I have a hike in the woods with Stephanie every weekend, I admit I may be too distracted by her to sense God fully there. I have not experienced in Vermont a traumatic weather event. Even the winter was quite mild, or so I am told.



I have yet to have an alter call here; so no one yet has barked like a talk or spoke in tongues. When do I experience God? With all of you. I did on Friday holding Allen’s hand in the hospital and I sensed through our touch an assurance. He eased. He calmed. He relaxed as we prayed. I do on Sunday morning, every time I see Ben, Lily, and all our

little ones sing. They know to whom they belong and they know they belong here in this faith community.



Friends, I have two points this morning. One, intentionally and intently seek the presence of God. In the midst of God's creation listening to a waterfall, seek the presence of God. In the hospital full of anxiety, seek the presence of God. In worship service today, seek the presence of God.



And two: Though we may sense it at different times, places and contexts, let us remember that the aftereffect of sensing God's presence is the same. We are all one, in union, with Christ Jesus.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".