

“Spirituality”

Isaiah 40:10-15, 25-31;
1 Cor 2:1-14; Matthew 3:7-12

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Last week we concluded our summer journey through the Psalms. We talked about the final Psalm, Psalm 150, which ended “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord!” It’s an appropriate place to start today because I want to think about the one we praise, that is, God.

If you were here at the end of last winter and spring, I talked a bit about a big word: God being *transcendent*, other. As we think about the nature of God – the one who created all that is, a being of that power – there is a certain “otherness,” a transcendence to God that I’m not sure I can ever get my hands around. In fact, when I think about the nature of God in that way, I wonder how we ever come to God. What can I do to come to one so grand?

There are a lot of things in life that I don’t really understand, and it takes encountering, living through something sometimes, to really get to know and understand those things. Some things I can decide to do. I can decide to go to school and learn something. I’ve been to school a number of times to try to learn something about God. And yet, there is so much to God. God is so grand that I’m not sure we can know that much, really, about God. So what do I do if I want to be in relationship to God?

There’s a story I heard. Perhaps it was about Abraham Lincoln – that’s the way it was told, anyway. He was walking along and a small child along his way was crying. Lincoln was president. He was an important person on his way to important things. He could have just kept going. But he bends down, takes the crying child up and lifts him up and begins to throw him up in the air, changing his whole perspective. Soon the child is laughing.

It feels a little bit like that to me with God. I would never expect God to stop and take time. And yet it is because God has done that, that God has not only created the world and made it a world that functions so that we can live and make decisions and live our lives out, but God has come beside us.

We could look lots of places in scripture, but today’s Isaiah passage says, “See the Lord comes with might and his arm rules for him. His reward is with him; his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will gather his lambs in his arms and carry them gently in his bosom; gently lead the mother sheep.”

We look throughout scripture and we hear about God coming. So there’s a sense that this grand and incredible God, a God that I don’t know how to approach, approaches us. And for those who open themselves to God, there is a carrying and feeding, a guiding and leading that God will do. It’s there, I think, where we begin to think about what it means to talk about spirituality. You see, it is the relationship we have with this transcendent one, this God of ours, that is somehow different than so much of what we do in life that we have that kind of word for it. It’s spirituality. It’s a relationship we have with God. John says God is spirit and we need to worship God in spirit and in truth. We begin to think about the idea that we can actually have a relationship with this transcendent one because that transcendent one has come to us and invited us into that relationship.

It was my temptation at this point to begin to think about what it means to talk about spirit. If we wanted to spend the rest of the week here, we could probably do a lot of work on that and still not completely get our hands all the way around it because when we talk about spirit, it's something that's ineffable. It's something we can't quite touch or feel, although we might experience something of it. We know it's something about who we are. It's about the essence of things.

Paul, in his passage today, says, "For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within." There's something essential about our spirit. We talk about the spirit of people. They can have a spirit of sadness or of joy. There's a certain sense in which our emotions and our understanding, our very life, is spoken of when we speak of spirit. That is the place where God encounters us, invites us.

Sometimes it feels to me like I've got to become a mystic to be spiritual. But it seems to me that when God comes to us, God comes in pretty incredibly normal ways. God comes in the person of Jesus, comes and walks among us. In some ways, that's a very spiritual act of God—becoming human, walking among us, being human, inviting us to know the wonder of God's love and grace. Because it's part of our relationship with God, it's part of the way God enters into our lives with us.

A second piece that I think is a spiritual element of God's relationship with us is simply scripture, the way God speaks into our lives through scripture. God gives us these stories and passages to ponder and wonder at, to learn from, to be guided by. In doing that, it's a spiritual activity. Not only that, scripture suggests that the spirit of God will be with us, helping us to understand, leading us in that process.

So what I want to think about this fall is: what is our spiritual health like? How do we think about our spiritual health, our spirituality, our relationship with God that comes about through God's coming to us, leading us, guiding us, feeding us, caring for us.

Just one other thing I want to add. In the passage from John, the author talks about Jesus coming and suggests that Jesus will baptize us with water and with fire. Now, the word baptism actually means to dip. It feels to me like what he's saying is that God is going to come in Jesus Christ and wash us, like we would wash a dirty window, and not only will our appearance change, but what people see through us, how we look, will change.

I think that's the idea of spirituality. It's opening our hearts to God to allow God to open us, to change us. We are invited to open to God, to be in that relationship, to let Christ lead us. Maybe some things will clear up.

Gracious God, we are thankful that you have come to us, that you have not stayed distant, that you come and take time for us. You enter into our lives through the wonder of your Son and his work among us and the work of your spirit, helping us hear the words Jesus gives us and all the words of scripture. Lord, continue to clear us up, wash us off, and let us become truly the people you have made us to be. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.