

## Experience

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

Some Sundays are difficult Sundays to preach because the texts are hard, complex, or troubling. I seem to recall Rev. Derrick one week recently suggesting that there was one week in the lectionary that his own seminary professors said that maybe it was a good week to get sick so you didn't have to deal. This week is a different kind of hard! I love each of these readings so much that I would like to preach an entire sermon on Acts, and on the Epistle, and on the Gospel. Honestly, I'd be happy to preach an entire sermon on the Psalm! Have no fear, though, this will not be as long as four sermons!

Instead of four sermons, I'm going to talk about one thread that runs through each of the readings: experience. Now, those of you who participated in Adult Forum during the time that it was doubling as confirmation class for myself, Paul, and Jamie may remember Reed Carlson talking about the "three legged stool" of Anglican Theology. It came up again recently in one of my courses, and I remembered one of the quarrels I have with it. The three legged stool is (which honestly, I find a weird image, as though we SIT ON our theology, I'd rather the three pillars, maybe?) rests on: Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. Anglicans, at least in theory, derive our doctrine from these three things. Now, when John Wesley was starting the movement that was to become Methodism, he added a fourth element, changing the three legged stool into the Wesleyan quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. I'm not at all certain why the earlier writers left out experience. Not only because I cannot fathom how experience could be just left out like that but because of readings like we have today: Not only does it seem TO ME that experience is important, but it seems to me that it seems to SCRIPTURE that experience is important!

In our short psalm today, we might all have some sense of how good and pleasant it is when we are together in unity, but the psalmist doesn't stop there: It is like fine oil upon the head, that runs down upon the beard. As a long, dry, artificially heated winter comes to an end, it turns out that the value of a good moisturizer was recognized long before the Nivea corporation got to us! This comparison of sensory bodily experience of comfort to the emotional experience of sibling love gives depth to the image, it gives us something that most of us have had in our bodily lived experience to hold on to, to hang that image on.

And the letter of John, what an opening: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—“ heard, seen, looked at, touched: the author of John is clearly asking us to believe his own bodily lived experience, his own experience of the divine. He continues: “this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it.” Two words in here are particularly striking: revealed: ἐφανερώθη” and that “fan” sound might be familiar from such words as “Epiphany” or “theophany” and the ultimate root of that all those “fan” words is the verb φαίνω “to appear, to bring to light, show, uncover, reveal” which in turn comes from the Proto-Indo-European meaning simply “to shine.” All the way back in the chain of meaning, it’s a bodily sensory experience: this life shined to us. This life was brought to light before us. This life was shown to us. That is how we could see it. After John completes his introduction, and his appeal to what he knows to be true in his body, he continues: This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” “θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν” God light is. Φῶς (as in the Evening Prayer canticle Phos Hilaron or even just the everyday word phosphorescent) means light and traces itself back to that same proto-Indo-European root meaning “to shine.” God shines. God illuminates. God reveals.

The second word is “testify,” John writes: “we testify to it.” Μαρτυροῦμεν comes from the verb that means, in fact, to testify or bear witness, but of course is also how we come to have the word martyr. Martyrs became martyrs—in our sense of dying for the faith—because they bore witness to Jesus Christ as Messiah. We testify to it. Every time we say the creed, we are martyrs because we are testifying to our faith. That something of air and breath and word and thought and feeling: testifying, has come to be associated with flesh and death and solidity and earth and burial bears its own witness to how seriously we need to take Christ’s injunction that we are “blessed when people revile us and persecute us and utter all kinds of evil against us falsely on Jesus’ account.” Not only on his account, but on account of our testifying to him. When we say that we believe, we stand ready to live out that belief in our bodies, with our hands and our mouths, and our eyes, and our ears, if we follow Jesus, we do not simply believe what we believe, but we live what we believe.

Which brings us, of course, to Thomas, deeply embodied Thomas. Where would the faith even be without Thomas? There were early Christians who believed that Jesus never had a body at all, that he only appeared to be human, that the incarnation was an illusion and that God speaking through Jesus was no more solid than through a pillar of cloud. And if there were people who

thought that of Jesus' earthly ministry than surely there were more who believed it about his resurrected body. Though this story of Thomas is only told in the Gospel according to John, we will encounter the disbelief in Jesus' resurrected body next week in the Gospel according to Luke, when the disciples are so frightened that Jesus has come among them that he suggests that they think that he is a ghost and he eats a piece of fish to prove his corporeality. With both the group of disciples in Luke and with Thomas in John, Jesus knows—perhaps for the very reason of *being* embodied—that sometimes we need to know something in and with our bodies before we really know it. We count on our fingers when we are unsure of a number. We practice things until we achieve muscle memory. We waste away as babies if we are not touched enough. The tiniest scent can unlock a world of memory. The first chord of a beloved song brings to us the entire song at once, and the situations of the various times we've heard it. We humans experience knowledge in our bodies as much as our minds, and we believe with our bodies as much as with our hearts. (I believe this is one of the reasons that I not only miss our in-person worship, but I specifically miss the embodiedness of it: singing in real time, feeling the pitches of those singing around me, processing, praying with our feet, kneeling, standing, bowing, approaching the altar rail... all these things that we do with our bodies.)

The apostles bore witness to what they had seen, and heard, and touched, and felt. And so do we. What we see and hear and touch and feel is different, but we too have direct experience of God. So on the one hand, that is why we have to say experience, because our direct experiences with God sometimes feel like a taboo subject. It can be really hard to talk about direct experience with God, and yet that is why so many of us are here, because of one moment in time, or repeated moments, when God has in some way said to us: "I am here with you."

On the other hand, maybe that's why our three legged stool doesn't have experience in it: because when we say "scripture" we do not only mean the words on the page, but our experience of reading those words, that which comes through the words that is more than the words themselves. Our reaction to the words that exceeds what words can do. The way the same passage of scripture is different to us on different days. When we say tradition, we do not only mean that the structure of the Eucharistic service has been very similar for 2000 years, first the word, then the table, but that there is something that comes down to us through tradition that is more than the tradition, there is an overflow, an excess, something that cannot properly be contained by tradition—it's an ineffable knowledge when we change something that the change harmonizes with tradition and that

knowledge is our experience. Or reason, when we use our reason to understand our scripture or our tradition, the Holy Spirit is also there, guiding our reason (when we stay open to it) leading our reason to lead US to new experiences of God still working in the world, and in our lives: Maybe we don't have to say experience because experience permeates all the ways that we testify to God.

Amen.

***Texts for April 10, 2021***

[Psalm 133](#);

[Acts 4:32-35](#);

[1 John 1:1-2:2](#);

[John 20:19-31](#)



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