

New St. James Presbyterian Church
March 3, 2019
Sunday of the Transfiguration
Rev. Dr. David Thompson

The difficulty of staying in the present moment

Text: Moses said; If they ask me what your name is, what shall I tell them?

And God said to Moses, “I am who I am...say to the sons of Israel. I AM has sent me to you!”

Today I want to talk with you about the difficulties of staying in the present moment. I struggle with this as I am sure you do as well. We all know what happens when we are not in the present moment when we need to be. Picture the surgeon who loses attention even for a moment with a deadly consequence. Or think about people who are not in the present moment while driving. **Distracted driving** accounts for approximately 25% of all motor vehicle **crash fatalities**. **Driver distraction** is reported to be responsible for more than 58% of teen crashes.

Picture the pilot who loses attention due to sleep deprivation, or the trucker who drifts his rig across lanes and jackknifes.

Some of us are absent with the people we love. We are worried about a challenge at work. We preoccupy and a racetrack develops in the mind and we go over and over the same things without resolution. And our spouse suffers.

Perhaps for you it is some sort of abuse or trauma you are having difficulty with and you can't stop thinking about it.

Perhaps you lost an argument, or your advice was ignored. Perhaps you have been wronged by someone deliberately. Perhaps you have had your boundaries violated and you don't know what to do and so you are overthinking it all the time.

Perhaps you are sad about a marriage that went south or a relationship that crashed. Perhaps you are worried about your future finances and wondering whether you will have enough? Perhaps its your health that is concerning you and because you can't resolve the issue you worry it to death.

What is it for you?

Being preoccupied and not in the present moment can have an amusing side as well.

While I was in Stratford, I got to know John Neville who at that time was Artistic Director of the Stratford Festival. One day I saw him pull up to a convenience store and get out of his car and go into the store. A few minutes later I saw him re-emerge reading a newspaper. He walked right past his car and walked home which was a few blocks away. Imagine his surprise when he

went to go out again and his car was not there? Did he remember or did he call the police to report a stolen vehicle?

However, I saw John Neville on stage on one memorable occasion. There was a distraction in the audience. Neville knew he was losing the audience attention and so he literally grew bigger on stage. He raised his voice and intensity, he stood taller, his gestures became bigger. It was amazing to see. He was fully present and powerful. He got the audience back!

I don't know if you watched the Superbowl as I did. I focussed on Tom Brady the legendary quarterback. I watched his eyes in particular. He was totally focussed in the present moment taking everything in. He was extremely intense. He was in utter concentration on winning the game. Nothing distracted him. At the end of the game the intensity with which he played showed in the long hugs given. What a glorious present he created for his fans with his total focus on being in the moment.

We had an Old Testament professor called Bob Lennox. He was a reasonably liberal Bible scholar and would not hesitate to state his doubts when he felt it necessary. But one day we were in class and the subject was the Ten Commandments.

For him these were not the ten suggestions.

For him there was a special holy quality about the Big Ten. He was in awe of them. You can see why even today. They are so relevant, in fact they underlie the news which is so often about violations of them.

So, when an upstart student started to run them down, Bob Lennox's face changed. He got very serious indeed and said, "Here we are on Holy ground." He saw them as coming directly from the finger of God writing on stone tablets...For him they were diagnostic of the human condition. They were the lighthouse, which if we paid attention to, we would not hit the rocks and sink our personal ship or the ship of the world. We needed to stop, take off our shoes for we were on Holy ground...

When we came across Moses this morning, he was asking what name he should say for God in order to be believed by the Israelites. "If they ask what your name is, what shall I tell them?"

In the Middle East at the time getting a deities' name was understood as getting power over them.

But this deity is having none of that. The answer is most mysterious and intriguing "Say **I Am** sent you." This is not Zeus of the Greeks or Marduk, the chief god of the city of Babylon and the national god of Babylonia; who ... After conquering the monster of primeval chaos, Tiamat, became Lord of the Gods of Heaven and Earth.

If God had called himself Marduk, Moses would have known who he was dealing with. Similarly, with any God or Goddess of Egypt.

But this name is not just about **naming** but about much more.

In English the words 'I am' are in the present tense. This God is in the present moment by name. He is a God of all BEING. He is in the present moment all the time. It is God's nature to be a presence in the now.

You and I when we say, "I am", because of the passage of time, we just were. When we die, as we all must, we lose our existence here.

But not so with God. God simply is, all the time. God sees the past and the future but remains in the present moment.

God is thus available. The doctor is in and will see you now, at this present moment. Say **I AM** sent you!

Interestingly in the New Testament when Jesus was asked about the afterlife, he said that God is not the God of the dead but of the living...meaning that all who have gone before are alive. That is what the **I AM** means. **We are human beings, because God is Being in the present moment.**

And this is Holy ground. It is irreducible. The nature of God cannot be said better or more simply. **I AM!**

According to the Bible you and I are made in the image of this God. Our consciousness, our most precious gift, is part of this image. That is why anything that we do, is done in the present tense. We don't do the future although we can influence it by what we do in the present. And we don't live in the past because nothing changes the past. We live in the present.

So why is it such a difficulty for us to stay in the present in our minds?? Why do we escape to fantasy or past romance or nostalgia or resentment or holding on to anger...anything but staying in the present?

Deepak Chopra gives us some very valuable advice on this question. In his delightful little book, The Seven Spiritual laws of Success , he argues that if we observe the people around us, they spend 99% of their time defending their points of view. He says that when we become defensive, blame others and do not accept and surrender to the present moment our lives meet resistance.

He asks us to completely desist from defending our point of view. When we have no point to defend, we do not allow the birth of an argument. He says that if we do this consistently- if we stop fighting and resisting- **we will fully experience the present.** Someone once told him the past is history, the future is a mystery and this moment is a gift. That is why this moment is called the Present!

And then comes the gold!

He says that if we embrace the present and become one with it, and merge with it we will experience a fire, a glow, a sparkle of ecstasy throbbing in every living being. And as we begin to experience this exultation of spirit in everything alive, as we become intimate with it, joy will be born within us and we will drop the terrible

burdens and encumbrances of defensiveness, resentment and hurtfulness. Only then will we become lighthearted, carefree and joyous!

For me this is where God is. This is why God never gets bored, and we need never to be bored either because we can experience this fire, this glow, this sparkle of eustacy, that throbs in every living being!

How do we keep our consciousness in the present moment?

We need to follow the advice of the Historical Jesus.

- 1) Don't judge! No negative condemnations especially of people. Stop defending your point of view. Remain open to all points of view. Accept the world as it is not as you would like it to be.**
- 2) Let go your attachment to outcomes. Leave it in the hands of God instead.**
- 3) Forgive 70 x 7. So much of our present moment awareness gets lost in unforgiveness. Free your mind up again. Forgive and do your best to forget, letting the resentment go.**
- 4) Walk a mile in the other persons shoes. Seek first to understand before you ask to be understood**
- 5) Be careful what you feed your mind!**

An old Cherokee was teaching his grandson about life:

“A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy.

”It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, ego, and thinking negatively about the future or living in the painful past.”

He continued, “The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, faith and living in the present moment. The same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: “Which wolf will win?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

Today is the Sunday when we remember the story of the transfiguration. It is also a story about God as I AM. When Moses met I AM his face shone and the people were afraid. The same thing happens to Jesus. He is transfigured. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light. Why? Because he had encountered The Presence. This was holy ground.

A great voice spoke saying: “This is my Son the beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him!” And then silence and the Presence is Gone, and it is just Jesus there.

If we listen to Him **then we take what Jesus says seriously about the present. He says:**

Therefore, I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?

26 Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?

27 Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

28 And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:

29 And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

30 Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?

31 Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

32 (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

33 But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

34 Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

In other words: Don't live in the past. Don't live in a fearful future! Don't be anxious! Stay where God is. Stay in the present moment.

Dr. Carol Weingarten says that the greatest lesson of her life came when her father was dying of cancer. Neither she nor anyone she knew could save his life.

At the time she was studying for a doctorate at New York University. She was taking a required course that met twice weekly. Those two classes were the only time she could get respite from the pain and grief she was experiencing at home. Yet when she left for class, even although she was more in the present moment in class, she still worried about Dad and the family.

A week before the course ended, her father's condition became terminal. She knew that she had to let the course professor know that she might be absent from the last sessions of the course.

After class she found him in his office. She did not intend to tell him about her personal situation. It was a large class and she was just one student.

But this professor was aware and in the present moment. He closed the door after she entered, sat behind his desk, and looked at her kindly as if he had unlimited time to talk. He asked her what he could do for her.

Suddenly she could not find her nurse's calm demeanor or the words she had carefully rehearsed. She simply put her head in her hands and wept. When she could finally stop crying, she told him the truth about her father and then she asked if she could make up the last classes.

The professor paused thoughtfully, looked down at his record book and then gently said: "The course ends for you today. You have been an A student; how would this change within a week? Go home to be with your father and your family. That is where you need to be."

That professor's release of the academic burden allowed her to live in the present moment and give all her attention and energy to her father and her family during the most difficult time of their lives. Her father passed away on the morning of the final exam for the course. But today, many years later, she can treasure the memory of being present with her father at the time of his death.

She says that what she learned from that professor about understanding and compassion remains for her the greatest lesson she had ever learned in any course.

What was the professor's secret? **He was compassionately aware in the present moment.** He didn't worry about tomorrow. He took no thought for it. Instead he was compassionate in the present moment. And the moment was transformed. And the future looked after itself. For the future is made in the present.

Let us pray for such a transfiguration in whatever situations we face!

Amen.