

Transfiguration Sunday, Last Sunday After Epiphany
February 7, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson
Readings Exodus 3: 1-6 and Luke 9:28-36

[Click here for an online Bible to look up these readings.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Peter and his companions were, quote, “weighed down with sleep”, and almost missed out. They almost missed out on an amazing, mountaintop experience with Jesus, Moses and the prophet Elijah - three key players in the whole story of God. It’d be kind of like going to the new Star Wars movie and sleeping through the chance to see Han Solo, Chewbacca, Leia and Luke again. Well, kind of like that only much more significant in the grand scheme of things. Peter, James and John almost slept through an experience of the transforming presence of God.

I can relate. I probably shouldn’t confess this to a room full of lots of educators, but I was frequently weighed down by sleep in my first semester of Greek at Luther Seminary.

- I had an amazing teacher and I loved the subject. I loved learning to read the New Testament in it’s original language.
- I studied hard every night; I was really motivated and got straight As.
- But I could rarely stay fully awake for an entire class period.
 - I had class right after lunch - the biggest meal of the day in the seminary dining hall.
 - Our professor had the most gentle, kind, soothing, soft voice I’ve ever encountered.
 - And since it was seminary, he began each class with a prayer - a long, beautiful, soothing, almost lullaby-esque prayer.
 - It got me every time. I spent just about every class period fighting sleep, my head bobbing up and down.

I’d begin every class determined to stay alert. I brought coffee, chocolate, water; I asked my friend Sarah to elbow me at the table we shared; and still I nodded off way too often.

- I missed out on so many opportunities to see my professor’s face shine with joy as he taught the subject he loved and as he saw people come to understand it.
- I lost chances to see my classmates light up as they discovered more about God’s word.
- I’m told my future husband was even in the class with me. I have very little recollection of that because all my energy was focused on fighting sleep, though he reports really enjoying the spectacle of my daily battle.
- All in all, I didn’t experience the presence of God as I could have.

What do we miss when we're weighed down by fatigue, worries and the tasks of the day? How often do we miss out on powerful experiences with God? Because, you know, it isn't just on the mountaintop or with really spiritual people that we encounter the presence of God. Each person on earth is created in the image of God; each person we meet can give us a glimpse of the face of God. It isn't just a seminary professor who can shine with joy as he's teaching. Each of us can come alive when we're doing what God has gifted and called us to do.

It isn't just studying the Bible that can open us to encounters with God. Anytime we engage with God's world is an opportunity to experience God's presence. God doesn't just show up in mountain top experiences, or in miraculous events like bushes that are burning but not consumed. No - As Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in her poem Aurora Leigh: "Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God."

Yet so often we move through life in a stupor - groggy and oblivious to the joy, the gifts, the wisdom, the love all around us. We overlook the presence of God among us. Maybe we're just too bogged down with the daily grind. Maybe if we could just get away from it all for awhile, just grab a break from the routine to get some perspective, then we'd be able to see more clearly and be more aware of the presence of God. That is important practice; retreats, vacations and days of Sabbath rest are important.

Yet the disciples in our story, Peter, James, and John, **were** given the chance to get away from it all, to go up on the mountaintop where they could get a new outlook on life.

- And, still they were weighed down with sleep;
- still they almost slept through God showing up.

Well, but still, maybe if we lived in biblical times **we** would be more attentive to God. I mean, those people in the Bible had it easier.

- On that mountaintop with Jesus, God spoke directly to Peter, James and John, even after they'd been so sleepy. God told them, "this is my Son, the chosen, listen to him." If we had things that dramatic happen to us, surely we'd take note, right?
- And surely any of us could be open to God if God spoke to us from a burning bush!
- It was easier then.

Except in the story of Moses and the burning bush, Moses had to notice that the bush was burning and turn aside to see before God spoke to him. The story goes, "Moses looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' **When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see**, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' It was only when Moses turned aside to look that God called to him. Moses still could have missed God if he hadn't been paying attention.

As Elizabeth Barrett Browning continues in her poem - "Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God: but only he who sees takes off his shoes."

- There are so many times that something amazingly beautiful and loving is happening, yet we don't even notice.
- And even if we do notice, we don't turn aside to look more closely; we just keep racing through the day.
- We don't stop, we don't pause in awe and wonder at the holiness of it all.

The issue isn't that we need a change of scenery; the issue isn't that we need more dramatic encounters with God; the issue is our sin. We're so curved in on ourselves that we struggle to lift up our weary heads, to look around and pay attention to the presence of God in our world and in those we meet. We're so often focused on our own needs, our own concerns, the way we appear to others, that we get weighed down with the fatigue and worry of it all. Our sin lulls us to sleep.

Thankfully, God keeps coming to us to wake us up and set us free from the sin that keeps us so oblivious. God turns up over and over again for us in the word, in music, in bread and wine, and when two or three are gathered in Jesus' name. God comes to bring us to our senses - to give us experiences of God that we can touch, see, taste, hear and smell so that we will be awakened to notice and respond to God's presence everywhere. We'll explore this more fully during Lent this year.

Sometimes God does show up for us in dramatic ways - in mountaintop experiences, in powerful burning bush moments. But mostly, God comes as God has promised week after week as we gather for worship. God speaks to us through scripture, music and other people; God comes to us in bread and wine saying, "this is my body, this is my blood given for you"; God is present as the body of Christ gathers together. God comes to us when we're as wide awake and alert as Moses was when he spotted the burning bush and turned aside to see. God also shows up for us when we're grumpy and tired. And, God doesn't stop coming to us no matter how many times we nod off, tune out or overlook God's presence.

God knows that we need many, many wake up calls - many repeated experiences that open us and free us from our self absorption. So God keeps showing up to forgive us, get our attention and set us free.

What has captured your attention today in worship?

Where have you noticed the presence of God today?

What might God be saying to you in word, in music, through the people you encounter today?

Let's take a few moments to turn aside and pay attention.