

Sermon
Last Epiphany
St. Andrew's, Methuen
February 14, 2021
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2 Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

Growing up I wasn't particularly scared of the dark, but I still vividly remember the night I was in our TV room in the basement watching the Alfred Hitchcock classic movie, "Psycho", in which Anthony Hopkins plays the quite crazy and murderous owner of the Bates Hotel. Watching by myself was a scary experience as the movie touched all the fears inside my 13-year-old mind.

But I survived the experience, turned off the TV, and then realized there was a light on in the very back of the basement that I had to turn off. Of course, I was perfectly safe, but I my mind convinced me otherwise, as I turned off that light in the back of the basement.

In the dark we have always imagined things as terrifyingly real that our simply products of our own minds.

Shankara, the great Hindu philosopher-sage of seventh-century India, used the example of a man walking down a road in the dark who sees a snake; his heart pounds, his pulse quickens. He is scared to death and can barely breathe.

But with more light, the "snake" turns out to be nothing more than a coiled rope. Once the delusion breaks, the snake, and the fear, vanishes instantly. See <https://vedanta.org/what-is-vedanta/the-concept-of-maya/>

For Shankara this describes why and how we live in fear: our minds are darkened by ignorance of the difference between appearances and reality. This ignorance he called maya, which is the ignorance of God, Ultimate Reality, and our true nature. In this ignorance we are forever imagining snakes where there is only rope.

Years ago I fell in love with an image of our true nature given by Frederick Buechner in his book, Telling Secrets.

He writes that the oldest part of the Tower of London, built by William the Conqueror, is called the White Tower. On the second floor is a small Norman chapel called the Chapel of St. John. "It is built all of stone with twelve stone pillars and a vaulted ceiling. There is a cool silvery light that comes in through the arched windows. The Knights of the Order of the Bath would keep all-night vigil over their armor before being anointed by the King. The chapel is very silent, very still. It is almost a thousand years old. You cannot enter it without being struck by the feeling of purity and peace it gives. **If there is any such thing in the world, it is a holy place.**" Telling Secrets, page 46

Underneath the Chapel of St. John, however, is the cruelest of its dungeons. It is only four feet square, so a prisoner can neither lie down nor stand up straight. It has a thick oak door; there is almost **no light** or air. It is known as the Little Ease.

Buechner says, "I am the White Tower, of course. We all are."

We all know what it is to live in the cramped prison of the fears created by our darkened minds. We live so much of our lives interacting with one another out of this dark place.

Yet, the chapel of Saint John, is also in us all. It is our truest self and the secret place Jesus tells us to go when we pray. In our Chapel of Saint John we **can say with Jesus, "The Father and I are One."**

"I am the Chapel of Saint John, of course, we all are."

In Mark's account of the Transfiguration, Jesus's Chapel of Saint John, his True Self, becomes visible.

The first thing we notice is the brightness. Jesus radiates light and removes all darkness.

Second, we see that Jesus is not alone—for Moses and Elijah, the heroes of Israel, dead for centuries, are perfectly present to Jesus.

Luke's account of this mystical event says Moses and Elijah talk to Jesus about his Exodus, about how he is going to lead humankind out of our fears through his cross and resurrection.

Listen closely to this from the Letter to the Hebrews, which says: "Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, Christ himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,

and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.” Hebrews 2:14

We are held in slavery—not just by the fear of physical death, but by the fear of all the little deaths along the way: our rejections, mistakes, and failures that live in the basement of our minds.

But Jesus Christ comes to “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.”

In this moment in our country with over 500,000 dead of Covid, we may be forgiven if we feel death is to be feared. Surely, **this** is real snake, a cobra, that destroys us all, because in our culture we experience ourselves only as an ego in a bag of skin that soon will be dust and ash, gone with the wind.

But in addition to having a physical body, we are a spiritual body.

As the great Jesuit paleontologist of the last century, Teilhard de Chardin said: **“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.”**

Remember when Jesus is arguing with the Sadducees who don't believe in resurrection, and he says to them: “And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? **God is God, not of the dead, but of the living.”**

As we spend more time in our inner Chapel of St John and less time in the prison of our darkened minds, we will understand the apostle Paul when he says today: “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”