

## *The Mystery of Presence*

A Sermon by the Rev. Robert V. Thompson  
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The story is told of a business man from Kansas City who was attending a conference in Chicago. Wanting to see the countryside he decided to travel on the back roads rather than the interstates. After many hours of driving he realized he was lost. Seeing a farmer tending his field on the side of the road, he stopped to ask for directions. "Can you tell me how far it is to Chicago?" The farmer scratched his head, "Sorry, I don't rightly know." "Well", said the businessman, "can you tell me how far I am from New York?" Again the farmer answered, "I don't rightly know." Frenzied and frustrated, the businessman asked, "Can you at least tell me the way to the main road?" The farmer removed his hat and shrugged his shoulders, "I don't rightly know, sir." The angry man shot back, "Well you don't know much do you?" "Nope", said the farmer, "but I ain't lost."

Like that businessman, you may have had the experience of waking up one morning only to look at the road signs of your life and realize not only are you not sure where you are, but also where you're headed.

It's inevitable. Sooner or later, on this journey we call life, the unexpected happens, and we find ourselves headed toward an unknown destination.

The mystery of how things turn out. We live as if we know what is going on and what will happen. We make our best plans but, as soon as we leave this moment for the next, we are in truth lost.

You may think you know where you are going after you leave the sanctuary today—but none of us ever really knows.

What are your plans for tomorrow? Next week? Next year? Got a five-year plan? Great!

Whatever your plans, you can count on one thing. Sooner or later something will come along and change your plans. And so it was for the Children of Israel. For many, many years they lived as slaves in Egypt. They plotted, they schemed, and they dreamed about the day when they would finally be free. Suddenly, that day arrived. It happened when Moses said to the Israelites, get up, pack up—let's get out of this hell hole of slavery.

While there is no archeological evidence that the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, according to the Exodus narrative they had been slaves for 400 years and were approximately 2 million strong. If they had poster boards and magic markers, no doubt some of them would have made placards that said "The Promise Land or Bust!" Well, as the story turns out, before the Israelites reached the Promised Land, they got busted.

For forty years they wandered in the arid desert wilderness.

Conditions were so severe it would have killed them all, had not the miracle of manna rained from the heavens. While it's true that human beings cannot live without bread, it is also true that we do not live by bread alone. So, while the miracle of manna fed their bodies, their spirits longed for a deeper nourishment.

And so it is. Whenever life becomes a wilderness journey the spirit longs for some place to call home. At a very profound level we are all wanderers and nomads. No matter our stage or station in life we are always in search of some safe place, a sacred center. As we travel through life, what we need most to know is that we are not alone. And so it was for the wandering Israelite tribe. And this is why God said to Moses: "I want the Children of Israel to know that, even though they are lost, I am with them always. It turns out that, as the Israelites wandered through the wilderness, they also carried the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was the sacred container that held the 10 Commandments. These ancient Israelites believed that this Ark of the Covenant was a direct portal to the very Presence of God.

As a tangible reminder that they were never alone, God told Moses that whenever they set up camp, a tent should be constructed around the Ark of The Covenant.

So every time they stopped along the way on their wilderness journey, they would make their camp and outside the camp they constructed this tent of meeting. Everyone who wanted to speak with God went out of the camp to that tent of meeting. Whenever Moses went out to meet God, all the people would rise and stand and watch him as he entered the tent of meeting. Whenever Moses entered it, a pillar of cloud would come down and stand before the entrance, and God would speak with Moses, face to face as friends speak to one another. In the tent of meeting, the little me is transformed. Over time, Moses and God had developed this intimate relationship. In this tent of meeting, Moses lost his ego—his sense of separate self—only to find himself in God.

For a moment, recall some conversation with another person—a face to face conversation—where, perhaps for only an instant, the two of you connected, and you suddenly saw that there were not two of you but one. How this happens is a mystery.

Not two but one. Ever had this experience with another human being?

Yet, this experience isn't limited to human interactions.

Sometimes while sitting quietly with our cat Quintilla, I have on occasion experienced a *quality of being* that mysteriously connects us. While we sit quietly in the same room, in the silence between us there is this sense of not two distinct beings, but one. I am certain that many of us have had this experience with animals—pets or otherwise.

The connection of being is not limited to being human.

Walking in the woods or standing on the shore—no longer self absorbed—we lose our sense of separate self. Not two but one.

This awareness is always available to us—the problem is that we are not often available to it. The problem is that we are mostly self absorbed. Yet it happens that in certain moments we get ourselves out of the way and open to the mystery beyond our thoughts and chattering minds. It is simply not possible to open to this ineffable mystery so long as we are full of ourselves. In truth, whenever we are absorbed with the little me, we are walking through the wilderness of life. But every now and then we get a glimpse. There is one Presence, one life living through everything that lives. This Presence that fills the world is larger and more mysterious than words or ideas or the mind can comprehend.

Have you ever gazed upon the infinity of space on a clear night, absorbed by the absolute stillness and inconceivable vastness of it? Have you ever listened, truly listened, to the sounds of silence in a forest? Have you ever for just a moment put down your personal baggage of problems of past and anxieties about the future and simply opened up to the mystery of this very moment?

If you have any awareness of what I am trying to put into words, then you have no doubt experienced the mystery of Presence. Beyond the splendor of external forms, there is more in this life: there is something in this life that cannot be named—there is something ineffable, some deep, inner, holy essence. When we encounter this mystery, we know this holy essence is what holds us and holds everything together.

To open to the Presence of this holy essence is to enter the tent of meeting. Whenever we enter the tent of meeting we may not know where our lives are going, but we know the most important thing—that we are never alone.

Every Sunday morning we gather.

The purpose of our weekly Sunday morning gatherings is to remind us that we are not alone and we are never alone. The deeper purpose in fact of every spiritual ritual is to remind us that every moment is constructed so as to be a tent of meeting, if only we enter it.

There is a reason we serve communion the way we do. When we offer the invitation to come down these aisles, we invite you to pull off a piece of bread. This little bit of bread is a tangible reminder of the little lives we live. Here today, gone tomorrow. But our problem is not that we live little lives. The problem is that we often see our lives as crumbly. A crumbly life is one that sees itself as separate. Most of our suffering is the result of seeing life as a fragment rather than a part of the whole.

We serve communion as we do to remind us to dip the fragments of our lives into the larger cup of life.

We dip the torn off piece of bread into the larger chalice of juice to remember that we all drink from one cup of life.

There is a Divine Presence that is always holding us. There is but one cup of life. Look into the cup of your life, look deeply and fear not. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, “Life is nothing

more than a cup in the hand of God.” Holding us all, each and everyone, is this Divine invisible hand. We offer communion not as the promise of some supernatural magic, but as a reminder that whenever we are open to this Divine Presence, we awaken to a mystery too great for words.

And whenever we awaken to this Divine Cup holder, whenever we truly enter this tent of meeting, we see there is not two but one. When we see this we realize that even though we feel lost, we are never alone.