

Theophany is a fancy word for an encounter or personal experience with God. The earliest examples of theophany in our scriptures include God's appearances to Sarah and Abraham as a stranger, to Jacob as a wrestler, and to Moses as a burning bush. Throughout the Exodus story, God appears as both a powerful, rumbling earthquake, as well as a pillar of cloud by day, and fire by night.

Whatever form the theophany takes, God tends to be mysterious, and dangerously powerful – this force is both beautiful and wild. It's something beyond our realm of comprehension.

Theophanies abound in Luke's gospel. As a matter of fact, our lectionary has included nearly a half dozen of them in this past calendar year. I'll tell you that Luke's theophanies tend to have more intimacy and humanity than the accounts provided by the author's First Testament predecessors. But the characters still don't quite know what to make of theophanies.

To be fair, God and God's agents, Jesus included, are direct about their purposes: The year of the Lord's favor is here! God is present. Now. And God's Spirit is ready to anoint all who would seek to be agents of God's goodness and God's possibilities.

But, nonetheless, some of us are terrified. We are deterred, intimidated, paralyzed by fear of what we don't yet comprehend. Zechariah receives news of fatherhood, but is rendered speechless. Shepherds hear the sweet harmony of an angel chorus, but their knees are knocking with uncertainty. What strange wonder is this? Peter, James, and John, take cover, as they look upon the transfigured Jesus. Disciples Mary, and Mary Magdalene, and Joanna are shocked to find the stone rolled away, and stupefied to encounter two strange angels,

also dressed in the dazzling white of transfiguration. And their male counterparts, even after hearing valid accounts from their ministry partners of Easter morning, not to mention the strange encounter along the Emmaus Road, are dumbfounded by the appearance of the Risen Jesus among them.

Translation: those of us who are the most learned, and faithful, and righteous (Zechariah is a priest of Aaron); those of us who have seen the strangest things (shepherds could write some stories, y'all!); those of us who knew Jesus the best and listened to him daily (the disciples spent three intense years with him!) – those of us whom we would expect to best receive extraordinary news and witness extraordinary events, are unable to process and draw meaning from the reality of God's presence in our midst.

These friends of ours are not alone. Luke's author scatters the words *perplexed*, *amazed*, and *astounded* throughout this account. Some of us are unable to grasp clearly or think logically about the actions of Jesus; some of us are filled with wonder at how Jesus lives out his life; some of us show great surprise in the way Jesus grasps life from lifelessness. Who is this man who speaks and lives like this? How can these healings, how can this breaking of social norms, how can this reimagining and redistribution of love, hope, peace, and joy be possible?

The truth is, Sardis, we are terrified. And perplexed. And amazed. And astounded.

Even with the incarnation – the lived Jesus – among us, we cannot yet make sense of God's presence, and of our role in extending the awareness and depth of God's presence with others. And now that both the lived, and the risen Jesus are gone – remember Jesus ascended and

reconnected with the Source last week on Ascension Sunday – we are not sure how to live out our next expression of Jesus-following.

We flip the page to Acts, the epilogue to Luke’s gospel. This morning, we hear tales of Pentecost, the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

This, if my count is right, is the tenth sermon I’ve offered on Pentecost. The previous nine times, my focus has been on analyzing the strange beauty of these events: a cacophony of languages transformed into a beautiful symphony; a restoration of the Tower of Babel – repentance expressed as a cycle of gathering and scattering across the world; an other-worldly encounter: wind, and fire, and earthquake, and a thousand tongues speaking the languages of a hundred-thousand generations from primordial, to prehistoric, to past, to present, to future. This is a text to get lost in. It’s twenty verses long with twenty years’ worth of ideas.

This morning, however, it’s not the rich and mysterious, cosmic even, sense of theophany that catches my attention. It is instead, the response of Peter and the apostles that moves me to my core.

Something has happened. Yes, of course, the apostles are still awed by the presence of God, but they are no longer awed, or terrified, or frozen by the idea that they can be witnesses to God’s presence. They have accepted their worthiness to be in God’s presence; they have accepted the idea that transcendence can be experienced by ordinary people; they have accepted that the same source, or energy, or spirit, or umph that flowed through Jesus, now also flows through them. The mystical, swirling, ever-creative power of God isn’t a spectacle; it’s a reality to be experienced.

But this is also another chapter in God's story of redemption and recreation. The intimate, tangible, humane knowledge of God that the disciples knew in their relationship with Jesus, ended, and abruptly at the Cross. And it's hard to give words to the grief they must have experienced, both in the loss of their dear friend, but also in the realization of lost opportunity. It's only after this relationship has transitioned to a new form that they fully realize its impact. And can't we say the same about the ones we have loved the most? Even in our fullest relationships, we understand the depth and beauty of loved ones even more so in their absence.

But today, somehow and somehow, the arrival of the Holy Spirit offers a new, but no less potent form of connection with our Creator. A relationship that transcends the physical. If Jesus modeled love for us, the Spirit is the portion that empowers and strengthens us to be that love across space and time. Jesus reminds us of our calling – being the children God has created us to be. The Spirit illumines for us, the ways we can be that love for God and one another.

Today, on Pentecost, Peter helps us to claim the *very way the Lord has prepared* in the prophecy, advocacy, and ministry of John and Jesus. And Peter, while he claims the words of Joel, has also affirmed the words of Mary:

'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

No Need to Be Terrified
Bob Stillerman
Pentecost Sunday, 5/28/2023
Acts 2:1-21



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I think it's also worth noting that today, the Spirit has empowered us to share the same calling Jesus proclaimed at the beginning of Luke's gospel when he picked up Isaiah's scroll and read aloud in his hometown of Nazareth:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

Sardis Baptist Church, today on Pentecost, our calling is clear, and so too is our capacity. It is indeed the year of the Lord's favor. We needn't be terrified, perplexed, or overwhelmed to receive such news. Rather we should feel emboldened and credentialed to live and to love just as God intends. For the Spirit is upon us. And it is moving, and working, and swirling all around us.

Thanks be to God! Amen.