

“Seeing God in Our Reflection”

Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 6:16-21

Rev. Rob MacDougall

2/17/10

Behind my house there is a wooded ravine. There are a couple of creeks that wind their way through the woods. Rising out of the lower spots in the woods, are a few ridges that offer dry points from which to see a bit more of the scruffy areas surrounding the rise. Though Wendy and I don't own the property in the ravine our neighbors have graciously told me that I am welcome to wander there whenever I like, so I do, in fact I think I am the only one that ever does.

Late fall, after the bugs and most of the leaves have fallen or departed, and the ground is not so marshy, I like to make my way down to one of the ridges. I don't carry my I-pod or anything else for that matter. I just go to look around and listen. If I go early in the evening I can watch the sun descend as if it is nuzzling itself into the ravine along with me.

This past November I was standing on the little rise I most frequently pause on, and I looked southwest as the warm setting sun was just above the tree tops. At first I looked off into the distance, taking note of how much space and untouched area that was all mine for that moment. But as I looked into the distance a little glimmer from a tree a few feet away caught my eye. Moving slightly in a gentle breeze was a thread strung by a spider between two trees. My focus had moved from the distance to this spider's glistening clothesline that was almost within my reach.

As I looked closer I noticed another thread going off to another tree, and from there I noticed another. The sun was descending bit-by-bit and it seemed now to be illuminating the space between the ground and where the branches of the trees thickened about 10 feet up. In a brilliant moment I looked out into this ten foot space, and with the right position of the sun I saw thousands, if not tens of thousands of single threads strung between trunks and branches large and small. It was amazing. It was all attached by this many layered web that went as far as I could see. It wasn't an intimidating web, it was fragile but resilient.

I stood in amazement watching where the sun caused the thread to appear and disappear in the breeze until the sun itself hid behind the rim of the ravine.

When I started climbing out of the ravine I felt that something new and amazing had just been presented to me. I walked into the woods not expecting anything new, but I was open to what it might offer. And it offered what had previously been for me, an unseen texture to the woods.

Moments like this one teach me about what is Holy. By Holy I mean those places, elements and times when God's presence is close. Holy moments are sometimes described as moments when the veil between heaven and earth is thin. Holy moments offer greater clarity regarding God's heart and ways, and at the same time offer greater clarity regarding our own hearts and ways. There seems to be a sense of something deeply personal and something amazingly universal taking place at once.

The season of Lent is an invitation to pause, to listen, to notice, to encounter the Holy. Like the Islamic season of Ramadan or the Jewish season of Rosh Hashana, during Lent we Christians are invited to observe some spiritual disciplines that are meant to help us experience the simultaneously personal and universal elements of life, to help us experience what is of God within and beyond us.

Our scripture passages this morning describe how some spiritual disciplines have gone astray. Particularly fasting was singled out. Instead of leading people into the Holy it seemed to have become an outward sign of religious piety, a false mark of religious devotion before others.

But this was never the intent of spiritual fasting. Quite the contrary, fasting was meant to raise awareness of one's body, both its needs and its strength. Fasting was also meant to free people from worrying about food so much, so that other matters could come into greater focus.

The final verse of our gospel passage reveals something of Lent's focus, "remember, where your treasure is there also is your heart." This isn't meant to be a static proclamation about the intractable state of our hearts. Jesus wasn't saying that our hearts cannot change or find new treasures, quite the opposite,

he might have said, “what you choose to treasure, will become that which captures your heart.”

Lent, which begins tonight, is a journey to discover and choose what we treasure. There are many ways to be on this journey, many resources that can help us focus, that help to free us from so much that consumes our hearts on a daily basis, leaving little room to see what is so close but undiscovered, like tiny threads strung between trunks and branches of familiar woods.

This year we offer you your own reflection as a spiritual resource for your Lenten journey. This year we are inviting you to look at your own reflection to see what can be discovered there.

You might begin by actually examining your physical features, taking note of your nose, eyes, smile lines, dimples, etc. If it's possible for you, look at your features without judgment. Keep from saying to yourself, “my teeth are crooked,” or “my ears stick out too much.” Instead look at yourself with interest, maybe noticing how your face fits together – how the bridge of your nose moves into your eyebrows, or how your mouth expresses your feelings, or how the wrinkles near your eyes give a sense of depth to what are called the windows of your soul.

Looking at our faces in this way is not so much about vanity as it is to look at one self with wonder, curiosity and even kindness. Our faces illustrate our uniqueness and participation in the human family. Our faces are amazingly complex and at the same time tediously common. To gaze into a mirror reminds us of all these things.

But this is not all we can see when we examine our faces. We can see the scars of our life experiences. The times when we were little and we were cut or bruised, the times when someone gave us care or when nobody noticed. We can see in our own face the generations of our families – we might have our mother's eyes, or our grandfather's hair, or great-great grandparent's lips. We can see in our own face where we have come from, a part of the world, our ethnic traditions.

In our own face we see that there are parts of life that we had nothing to do with bringing them into existence – they are gifts and sometimes they might feel like

burdens, but no matter what they are, they are part of us and they are part of what God brought into existence.

For those of us looking to find God's presence, God's touch, even God's very image, we need not look further than our own face. The veil between heaven and earth can grow thin by simply looking in the mirror. That which is Holy isn't relegated to places or people who are far from us – that which is Holy is part of us.

The second of Jesus' great commandments is to "love you neighbor as yourself." Jesus was always making the point that loving others is to love oneself, which is also to love God. Our Lenten journey is really about learning to love in all these ways. It is about learning to treasure what God treasures. The mirrors we have received this evening are a resource for us to continue learning about loving ourselves, to appreciate our uniqueness, our relationships, our heritage and the ways we reflect the divine. May each mirror we look into during Lent become a wondrous opportunity to see God's face in our own.