

Lent 3B 2015

Exodus 20; I Cor. 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

The Hebrew word for the God's presence is 'shekinah'. It is derived from a root that means to settle, to inhabit or to dwell. It is used to describe things like birds' nests. In religious terms, it also has a meaning that tries to capture the concept of glory. In the Christmas stories we hear of the 'glory of the Lord shone around'. In other places the scripture talks about the spirit of the Lord settling upon someone and then they do wondrous things like prophecy or some miraculous act.

The Shekinah then is that sense of glory, or brooding presence that settles upon and even inhabits someone. After the events of Pentecost, where the Spirit of God settled upon the disciples, they began to speak in different languages. As you may recall, they were accused of being drunk but Peter spoke to the crowd, saying "No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.'"

Many people have had experiences where they have sensed the presence of the divine. In my own experience there was a true sense of brooding. I was praying and a presence literally settled upon me. I experienced something like the air getting heavier, surrounding me. And while I felt God's glory and a truly overwhelming sense of love but at the same time that nearness that undiminished Love also made me fearful. It was just too much to endure. So I asked that presence to back off which it did. To

this day, I wish I had the ability to have endured that presence because I have never felt it quite that way since. Does this mean then that my experience with that brooding Spirit, that mothering Spirit whose glory evokes a ferocious love, does that mean that I had an interaction with God and that is it? No, I consider that experience as simply that: an experience. It is a place I go to in my memory, and if anything, it helps me to understand that God is completely other. It helps me to embrace the mystery of faith. It helps me to understand that I do not understand. And yes, in spite of my better judgment, call it my own lack of faith, this kind of experience makes me more convinced than ever that there is “something out there”!

In our sacred scriptures, that Shekinah is a prevalent aspect of God. It was there at the beginning “brooding over the deep”, it was there in a pillar of flame by day and a pillar of cloud by night as the people of Israel journeyed away from Pharaoh and a life of slavery. It was there with Elijah in the cave as in the silence after the tempestuous storm. The presence of God drew the people in exile back to the land of Abraham. It rested on Moses as he went up the mountain and his hair turned white as he literally shined coming down the mountain. It dwelt in a tent as the Ark of the Covenant was carried in the wilderness with the Hebrew people. And finally, in the prologue of John we read that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The New Testament scholar Karoline Lewis remarks that that word ‘dwelt’ literally means, “tented” and that it is an intentional word play to evoke the Shekinah dwelling or Spirit dwelling that is understood how God is with us, both in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament. Further, this is what makes the notion of the incarnation that

much more important, because the Shekinah is no longer in the pillar of fire or on the mountain. The Shekinah is not in tent, or in the Temple. That brooding spirit of God is in you. The scriptures tell us that our bodies are a living Temple for the Spirit of God to dwell. Jesus told his critics that if you tore down the temple, God would rebuild it in three days. That number “3” is a number of perfect completion, the number of God. So what I think he is saying is that you can kill me, but the glory of God will come to rest and abide in the human heart. It might begin with me, but it will not end with my death. The incarnation, the act of God becoming flesh begins with Jesus but continues in us. Jesus’ dream of the Kingdom of God is the act of embracing a God who deeply desires a living breathing relationship with you...with you! It is in that relationship that the Spirit of the Divine will act in this world.

Now you may ask, “What does that Divine action in the world look like?”

Well, my belief is that it looks like you and me, fully aware and fully alive. It looks like the Shekinah of God, the glory of God being revealed in us and through us as we engage life to its fullest. It is less about an experience of the brooding Spirit in that mystical sort that I shared with you and more about the reality of God embracing humanity to reflect our truest selves. We need go no further than our Baptismal covenant. To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. To strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being.

I was reading a publication that I have been subscribed to for many years called the Christian Century. In that publication, the Editor leads with an essay. The essay reported that in the 4 trillion dollar budget for our

country, 1 billion dollars is being directed to assist Central and South American countries in reforming their judicial systems so that fewer women and children have to flee their countries. The article reports that, “Most of the women and children entering our country from Central America are victims of domestic and gang-related violence and they would benefit from more effective local governance.”

That made me feel good. That seems like a great investment in creating dignity for people on a systemic level. Then the other shoe dropped. The article goes on to say that the budget calls for increased funding to house these families in detention centers to the tune of 850 million dollars.

“Much of that money would go to the Corrections Corporation of America, which operates a newly opened family detention center in Dilley, Texas. At Dilley, the largest such center in the country, 2,400 detainees will be housed at a cost of \$300 per day. The average age of children incarcerated there is six” years old. That translates to over 109 thousand dollars a year to keep an innocent six year old behind razor wire fences when the most conservative estimates for hardened criminals is between 50 and 60 thousand dollars a year.

When I read this, I literally cried. My aim here is not to tell you how to think about the issue of immigration reform. But it is not an antiseptic political debate either. Human lives are being affected. Our faith tells us that the very God whom we seek and serve resides in the heart of those mothers and children. That is what we say with every baptism. The incarceration of these families might be an expedient way of communicating to those who would attempt to cross our borders not to

come, but what is the cost to our collective soul, the soul of *our* people?
Does border security come before basic human dignity?

The Shekinah, the glory of God is in us. It is in all who open themselves to God. And I have to believe that something of that Shekinah is even in the hearts of those who reject the Divine as well. Call it an echo of the creative hand of God. If revealing that Shekinah is a part of our living fully, which I think it is, is it not also to be our Christian duty to enable and empower others to come to that same place of fullness and life? I think the answer brings us back to that essential lesson from Cain and Abel: Am I my brother's keeper? Amen.