

Fifth Sunday of Easter  
May 14, 2017  
The Rev. Denise Trogdon

### **God with “skin on”**

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

A four-year-old little girl cried out for her Daddy in the middle of the night. This was the third night in a row, her exasperated father thought as he got up to calm her back to sleep. After the nightly ritual of looking in the closets, checking under the bed and turning on her night light, her father said “It’s time to go back to sleep now. Besides honey, you are never alone. God is always here and there are many angels watching over you.” And she replied, “But I want someone with skin on!!”

Can we relate to that? Someone with “skin on” who can be touched and experienced in the flesh, gives us comfort and assurance beyond what intellect, imagination or faith provide. Like children who have not yet formed that internalized image of a parent, and cry when they leave the room, we have trouble sustaining our connection to the unseen and eternal. In this world, we need God with “skin on.”

Jesus knew this about his disciples as he spoke with them that night in the upper room. In the passage from John’s gospel this morning, we backtrack to hear Jesus’ farewell discourse the night before his crucifixion. He gathered his followers together to prepare them for a time when they would no longer see him in the flesh. It was an eternal moment, where Jesus gave his friends a glimpse of the kingdom.

Jesus comforted his disciples saying, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my father’s house there are many dwelling places. I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” These words also used in our burial liturgy, comfort those who mourn the loss of someone dear. At the edge of his own grave, Jesus reassured his disciples that death is not the last word, love endures and makes a home for us. Perhaps this “dwelling place” was not really a place at all, but a relationship to God.

We see the humanity of those terrified disciples as they struggled with questions that also resonate in our hearts. “Lord we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?” Jesus responded, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” This “I AM” statement revealed his identity as divine, hearkening back to God’s revelation to Moses in the desert as “I AM.” Christ’s presence on earth was God’s decisive act of love for humankind. Jesus was the embodiment of the way to God, God with “skin on”. Without his physical presence, Jesus’ followers would have to look to the life of Jesus to know the way; one who lived God’s mercy and love, one who healed the sick and cared for the outcast.

Jesus reflects in this passage a vision of what God looks like. God is all that Jesus embodies, love for you and me and for the whole world. Yet, this particular scripture has often been used to support an exclusivist view of the Christian faith, as the only way to God. To pick one verse out of the context of this gospel, is to miss the entirety of Jesus’ life and teachings. Jesus opened a way for all of humanity to see God in relationship. And God is surely present in every aspect of

God's created space and time, just no longer God with "skin on." Following the way of Jesus brings us into eternal life right here on earth. So if we look to heaven to be a place we go, we may just miss the ways in which God is present to us in the now. Every so often our vision widens and deepens to catch a glimpse of the eternal life God offers us.

Years ago I went to a CREDO conference designed for priests to take some time to recalibrate, to reset their vision and take stock of where they are spiritually. I chose to go to Prescott, Arizona. It was a beautiful setting, gorgeous, crisp air and lots of trails to hike. One particular morning at our communal worship, we were given a rich Eastertide question to ponder: What am I willing to let die in my life to make room for new gifts of God's grace? The question cuts to the heart for most of us; laying open our fear of change, our separation anxiety from what makes us feel in control, our need to know the path before it unfolds. But new life comes as a gift when we dare let go of what is passing away, and trust in God's eternal love. With each loss and renewal we grow into the fullness of God's possibilities.

So I pondered this question as I walked the desert path, dry and brown, surrounded by rocks, a little anxious that I did not know the way. There were places well worn by other sojourners and spots where the path was not so clear. I stopped as the wind roared through the valley. I could hear a stream near me burbling. In the crevices of the rocks sprouted painted cactus and dainty yellow flowers. As a lizard scrambled by, a thought came to me, there is life in this desert and God's is present even in the dry places. This seemed a moment outside of time, God's revelation of God's self in the beauty of creation, and a word of hope to my heart. God invites us all to dwell in these eternal moments.

Jesus left his disciples with a challenge to ponder. He said, "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly I tell you the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact will do greater works than these." As Jesus departed the world, he sent his disciples on a path of living the way, the way of compassion, mercy, and love.

We too are sent into the world from this place, where Jesus has fed us, and tells us to love one another. Like the disciples, we don't know what is ahead but can trust in the same promises; that God creates new life in the midst of death and dwells in us to guide our way. And if we pay attention we will get glimpses of eternity.

Thomas Merton, a contemplative and Catholic monk, wrote about this eternal realm in which we find unity with God and our fullest sense of who we are. Merton writes, "Our discovery of God is in a way, God's discovery of us. We cannot go to heaven to find God because we have no way of knowing where heaven is or what it is. God comes from heaven and finds us. God's seeing us gives us new being and a new mind in which we discover God."

As we are sent out to do God's work in the world, God dwells in us in a new way. We serve not in God's power but in God's mercy, not in God's greatness, but humility, not in judgment but in hospitality, the way we know Christ dwelled on the earth. And in so doing we find our fullest being in God. May we open our hearts to see the eternal God showing us the way home. God working in us just might be the God with "skin on" someone needs, Amen.