“Altered States”

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We will be coming to the phrase altered states eventually, but first I want to talk about a simple question in view of a couple of images that I hope you can carry with you today. The real question at hand this morning, for Paul and for Jesus—and for us is what it means to be a Christian. We may have grown all our years believing that it is a state of being and a state of mind that is consistent with our natural selves, and that could be a glorious thing. We may also have wondered when and if it will ever make a difference in our lives. There is no avoiding what both Paul and Jesus say on this count: Being a Christian makes a radical difference in who we are and how we live, or we may want to think again about what this state of mind and being is. Two different things happened this week that I want to share with you before we get to the images I want you to take with you. Mary Robinson shared a story in our Thursday bible study that I have been thinking about since then. Mary was a chaplain for years at Children’s Hospital in Boston. As such, she helped people, walking with them in some of the most joyous and absolutely most devastating moments of their lives. She shared the story of sitting a mother and her 4-year-old daughter, who was dying of leukemia. Of course it was a devastating time. At one point, though the girl was essentially unresponsive and had her eyes closed, she opened her eyes and said clearly, “Hi, Grampy, and began to play, aloud with him, seeing her grandfather who had died just weeks earlier.” I can’t imagine the depth of sorry this woman was experiencing in the loss of her father and the imminent loss of her daughter. But she said that in that moment she knew hope, and for me, it makes all the difference. The hope makes all the difference. What I have been carrying since Thursday is just this? What difference does it make to have faith? It makes *all* the difference in how we open our eyes and our hearts to life, trusting that there is life eternal, and also trusting in the joy it brings today.

Doug and I stopped on the way home from picking him up at the airport, and after eating dinner in Ellsworth stopped off at the Surry Town Hall for their monthly contra dance. Doug has never been to a contra dance before, and I have been to a lot of them, and know the joy it brings. Doug’s remark was “everybody is smiling. Everybody is smiling.” We saw John and Marsha there, too! There is something about uninhibited dance that causes people to smile. I think often about the joy we say we know through our faith, and wonder about how it might be reflected in our happy faces. We trust that God loves us and there is nothing we can do about it. There should, therefore, be a lightness about our days; and, seeing God’s light in everyone else, with every spin around our figurative dance, we may know that in another and, so, feel inclined to smile at them. And when we see others who are not joyful, the easiest way to bring them joy is to smile. Have you noticed that? This isn’t to say that life is always easy; it is not to say that we are Pollyannas who grin through disaster, but that at our root there is a foundation of light that can shine through and in the darkness.

The first image I want us to consider this morning is a dimmer switch. We have them here in the sanctuary. I think of a dimmer switch when I think of Nicodemus, because, in scripture, his is a kind of a gradual move toward and into the light which he eventually radiates, himself. Remember that Nicodemus is the one who goes in the dark of night to meet Jesus because he doesn’t want to see his questioning and his burgeoning faith when he queries Jesus. Nicodemus is the one who, when Jesus is brought before the tribunal, reminds the rest of the Pharisees that he should not be condemned without being allowed to state his case. The dimmer switch got a little bit brighter there. Finally, he prepares Jesus’ body along with Joseph of Arimethea—and the light shines, the light of his faith and his commitment to living in faith. So, when we think of the dimmer switch, we can think of ourselves, and when we keep it low, it can even flicker out, and we also can turn it up, with a gradual understanding and a gradual, growing joy.

We also can have the image of a spotlight, and I think we can focus on Paul himself for a good understanding of how the light functions for us. Saul had certainly heard the good news about Jesus, but even with the spotlight on that truth of Jesus’ being and what he was doing for his disciples and others who were following him, Saul was persecuting him and the other early Christians. Then, there is the sudden spotlight on the road to Damascus when Saul becomes Paul, becomes a servant of the Christ he was persecuting. He realizes that he had been moving in the shadows. If you think of a play with a spotlight, in which we know what one character is doing in the spotlight, with the stage crew running around in the darkness, hidden from the light on the one we are meant to see. We do scurry sometimes. We scurry out of the light because it can sometimes feel easier to live in the shadows, because of what is demanded of us, or requested, or invited of us when we look at the light that is the good news that we are loved and are asked to love others.

Fred Craddock’s question and one of his answers asks, "What does it mean," asks the candidate, "to become a Christian?" “Many, of course, do not think in terms of before time and after time, and they seem to function without this concept. But what such language seeks to convey is hardly a casual option. The life of the believer is set in a narrative far grander than the narrow parentheses of one lifetime. Faith says there is a metanarrative, a story within which our stories make sense. In other words, "from God, to God." So, another image for us: if a parenthetical statement were our life, well, no . . . there is a metanarrative in which our lives now are part of a far greater story. We have a story within a far greater story. In thinking of this, I would like to share a favorite poet to you, one I may even have sheared before now. The English Romantic poet William Wordsworth wrote his “Old: Intimations of Immortality” and I think of it as this kind of metanarrative—our story within a larger story. Wordsworth writes,

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;  
The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star,  
          Hath had elsewhere its setting  
               And cometh from afar;  
          Not in entire forgetfulness,  
          And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come   
               From God, who is our home.

When we are born, we are born “trailing clouds of glory from God who is our home,” and to whom we return, as we learn in our faith.

Craddock points out in his discussion of this passage from Ephesians that the text does not use the usual Pauline phrase "*in* Christ Jesus," but "*with* Christ Jesus." There is a big difference here.

God’s grace is the spotlight, one in which we can revel in our brilliance as we move *with* Christ, or one from which we can try to hide, and find ourselves in stark shadow.So, the question for us becomes what our rebirth with Christ will look like *today*, when what it will look like for eternity is revealed to us in scripture. We *are* seated with Christ because of God’s grace. We *are* saved from hopelessness and from despair; we *are* saved from falseness and evil.

So, to the expression “altered states,” which I remember from a disturbing movie in the 70s or 80s sometime. What will our altered state as Christians be? I think of those who try to alter their state of mind or being with chemicals of different kinds, trying to create more shadow rather than more light; thinking of the ways we find joy in our faith and in community, and wondering how we go about our days today, inviting others into it. I spend a lot of time out in community wondering how we bring us to them and how do we bring them to us. Well, when we can share what a wonderful altered state is carried in faith. Religion gets a bad rap. IN speaking with Nancy Hathaway, who is the head of the Zendo in Surry, she said that there are fewer members even there—in religious bodies worldwide, primarily here and in Europe. Diminishing numbers, but the light shines as brightly. So, we can ask ourselves from what darkness can we move into what light of present grace for ourselves and others? What can the smallest thoughts that cross our minds anticipate? By that, I mean what can we be attentive to, with intention, and therefore look forward in a different way? What can our first reactions to others be? Can we assume the best before we assume the worst? Can we look with kindness rather than criticism? Can we give before we take? Can we question before we command?

What will our truth look like , as we try to alter our state of being through our faith? I’d like to close with a familiar prayer from St. Francis, one that I have read from the pulpit as prayer, and which I now ask that you consider in terms of what it would look like in your life. Let’s pray together.

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood, as to understand;

to be loved, as to love;

for it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. Amen