

Entheos: Sometimes There's No Holding Back
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Tzaddi (tzad-he) is the eighteenth letter of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

This morning's section of Psalm 119 is called *Tzaddi*, not only because it is the 18th strophe in this poem, but like all the strophes before it, each line begins with the letter in the Hebrew alphabet that corresponds with the strophes from 1 – 22, for the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. In other words, each line in this strophe begins with the Hebrew letter: *tzaddi*.

The literary device in use is a form of an acrostic and through it the author gives the psalm an oriental flavor in terms of its construction and a somewhat limited expansiveness. The imposition of such a structure also prevents the psalm from any complex literary development beyond the constraints of its form.

The purpose of this longest of the psalms is not to develop a literary work but to give tribute to the law: the Hebrew Law of the Torah. It is a tribute that goes beyond the details and minutia of statutes to a deeply abiding place of commitment, assurance, and faithfulness in the psalmist. We get the sense that the "love of the law" of this psalmist has a much different meaning than what the same thing said in this day might mean. To love the law, today, might mean to some of us a love of statutes too often used for marginalization, exclusion, and dominance.

For the psalmist, though, the declarations are springboards to the cosmic presence of Elohim (God) that exists beyond and precedes all law – and in whom all law is consummated. It is a psalm of faithfulness into the ultimate promise and assurance of the unknown mystery of God. A much different meaning, don't you agree?

The psalm represents a trust in God, that following the law as Truth (with a capital "T") is an endeavor in the pursuit of wholeness – not as a checklist of accomplished tasks – but a giving of oneself over to God that will bring righteousness and fulfillment – for it will be pleasing to God.

As if a punctuation on this point, Psalm 119 ends with the verses:

Let my supplication come before thee;
Deliver me according to thy word.

Let thy hand be ready to help me,
For I have chosen thy precepts.

It is easy to see the enthusiasm or zeal for God in the author's writings. A real energy is present is most likely was contagious for many and annoying to others. Such is the way of enthusiasm, at times....

I may have told you the story about me as a kid that had to do with me getting my head stuck in the rungs on the back of a chair? Well, I had a lot of enthusiasm in those days, some called it being just plain hyper! I was into everything, like parsley.

Sometimes it was gleefully contagious – at other times, I drove folks crazy!

One day in my inquisitive, hyper state I must have wondered what it would be like to look at the world through the back of a chair. So, I thrust my head through the rungs, had my look around, and then decided to retreat – only to find that what sometimes goes through one way – can have a difficult time coming out the other way.

I was stuck. All efforts failed to extricate me without the bending and cutting that followed.

Call it curiosity, stupidity, hyper, or poor spatial abilities in action – I immediately recalled this incident when I first heard the Greek definition for the root of the word *enthusiasm*: i.e., **entheos**: the spirit within.

That was it. It perfectly identified what I knew it to be in that distant memory: the indefatigable Spirit within, an energy, a force, a delight – and today I know that as the God within me.

Alas, childhood antics that are indicative of the presence of God are not the total sum of our actions or the situations we face in life. Enthusiasm can wane, as can awareness of the presence of God in one's life. Adulthood brings with it an understanding of the meaning of ebb and flow...

I have known the ebb of such times, when the flame of *entheos* seemed nearly extinguished, indiscernible, offering little or no warmth, except in memories of better times.

And, I have felt the bright light and heat of moments sublime and wonderful, feeling as though every molecule of my being was sparkling and alive in the Shekinah, the glittering presence of God.

And, mostly, today, I know the gentleness and ontological certainty: that is the nature of our being, of course, *being* God.

The enthusiasm I have today is building, growing – I hope – toward that of the psalmist, readily prepared to face life: being in Being – that is, in the presence of God.

Such a place, for me, transcends any and all religions. Sorry. Religions are good things in many ways, but in some ways – for me – they sometimes make it hard to breathe.

It is the purity of spirit and expansiveness of possibilities – represented by what drove me into the back rungs of a chair - that is closer to God for me, than any one who might be seated on the highest of chairs of any human institution calling forth edicts or other directions.

Religion, traditions – so nuanced over time – too often embrace “human ignorance” to such a degree that they will not even “admit the possibility of correction.”¹

Like Jesus, at least I believe like Jesus, conformity for conformity’s sake has never meant all that much to me – especially in the important matters.

It occurs to me that if we are to find God in our lives, as we have learned here in this gathering, we need to be able to embrace God in all God’s mystery and wonder, neither limiting the joy of such understanding or the challenges to which it may call us.

Now that’s enough to get one excited!

It is, in some ways, what I think is unique to churches like Palisades Presbyterian Church – we have come together as individuals who acknowledge (even if we don’t understand) the intricacies of God’s design – in our willingness to see the possibilities inherent in being open to the Spirit and all its energy – even when it stretches us further than we ever thought we might go. It is the energy, as Ivan might call it, of the up-conscious!

We get it. We get it that it is not us stretching ourselves – but the Spirit, as we know it – pulling us into the midnight streets of metropolis, the quiet bedsides of those ailing, the justice that is demanded of us to herald, the sacredness of keeping our young people open to the possibility and presence of God – however we may tell the stories..and much more...

And in Luke, this morning, it is just such a story of stretching and being stretched. A story of one being pulled not just from the crowd to sup with Jesus, but from his way of life – called into a new way of being, as a result of his encounter with Jesus.

Can you sense the energy that Zaccheus must have felt coursing through his body?!

Like a symphony that calls us forward to listen more clearly to the quieter movements only to sometimes explode with the sudden presence of an upheaval – in such ways can a life be changed from its more passive state to a place of agitation of the Spirit. A state of remarkable change in ways never thought possible – because the Spirit, God is at work!

Zaccheus – could he have imagined that on that day, his curiosity (spiritual inquisitiveness?) would place him in a tree to see this one called Jesus of Nazareth? Could he have imagined that at the end of the day he would be so changed that not only would he be hosting Jesus of Nazareth to dine but becoming a disciple, as well?

What happened? How do things like this happen? In a moment, I think is the answer – a moment that has been in preparation for a lifetime to that point.

¹ Harris, Sam. The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason. W.W. Norton, NY. 2005. p.229.

Luke's narrative makes it clear that the invitation is there for all to follow Jesus. The welcoming hand is there. And Jesus makes it clear that he will not be put off by those whom others call "unclean" or "sinners."

What is not always stated is what Jesus' acceptance of those others marginalize – say of those who marginalize – but we get the picture: closed, close-minded, all possibilities accounted for and filed. Dead-ends, one might say – yet, not without hope for them, for I, too, have sometimes felt like a dead-end. Such is the reason we hold hope for others when they cannot hold it for themselves.

It is the hope we hold onto that demonstrates what can happen when a person knows God, as in this story or in other ways: something changes...something that doesn't need anything more than a listening heart to know. Then, with willingness, the rest happens...

The Spirit Within – **entheos** – is willing to wait for a long time, if needed. Once it is awakened, though, places like this filled with hearts like yours become powerful witnesses to the gospels, our own personal stories, and our experiences in community – speaking of our encounters with God – so that others can find voice to their own such occurrences.

At the same time in a wonderful way, we become an oasis for the weary to rest and once revitalized – re-spiritized – to add to the energy and Spirit that we need to stay alive and the broken world needs to heal. Make no mistake about it – this church wakes people up!

Like the psalmist, we know the deeply personal and real presence of God. Like Zaccheus, we know how the presence of God changes our lives and what it means to be welcomed into community. Just listen to joys and concerns in a little while – you'll hear this at the root of everything that is stated.

We understand the nature of our work and mission not just as some compartment in our lives, with certain responsibilities to be managed and adhered to – but as the deeply rooted cosmic eternal integration of our being and our relationship with God. This is where we practice such things together, practicing the presence of God as we do our best to navigate life on its terms, with an eternal sense of "the much more than we see."

Such an eye or vision opened to God can only be filled with the spirit of the psalmist and the enthusiasm, energy, and generosity of Zaccheus.

What better way to close these comment this morning than with the ancient Sanskrit you have heard before: Namasthe: the Spirit in me greets the Spirit in you – seems to say it all.

Amen.