

Well, I thought it would be really interesting to preach on the beheading of John the Baptist on my very last Sunday at St. James. I, in the end, decided to go with our reading from II Samuel and the idea of wellbeing offerings.

In this passage, David has gathered 30,000 people to set out and retrieve the Ark of the Covenant and to bring it back to his city in Zion. The ark was like a portable box that was meticulously crafted to carry Israel's 10 Commandments that had been given to David's forefather, Moses, and etched on tablets of stone. These Commandments established a Covenant between God and God's people, outlining the terms of their relationship. God's people would follow this way of ethical living and God would remain faithfully devoted to them.

But even more than being the home to this sacred Covenant, the Ark was perceived as being the home of the very presence of God. It was the physical manifestation of the divine in the world. It was so holy that touching it meant instant death, and so wonderful that returning it to David's city was cause for great celebration. As a brief aside to our story, to apply this concept to our current lives, later scriptures say that we now have this Covenant written on our hearts instead of written on tablets of stone. They say that God's Spirit is dwelling within us, making God's presence not just external, but also internal.

As a church, we experience God's presence externally through being the gathered body of Christ. We experience it through the grace that is imparted to us through our sacraments. We experience God's presence internally in our own inner beings. God's presence externally and internally mirror one another.

The Apostle Paul talks about this as a New Covenant in which the same glory of God that was revealed to Moses is being revealed in us as though reflected back to us in a mirror. Seeing this glory for ourselves transforms us from one degree of glory to another. We do this mirroring for one another in our lives of faith. As we see God's glory in one another, it helps it grow within us. As God's

glory grows in us, we mirror it back to those around us.

Eugene Peterson's translation of John chapter one says, "The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory. Like Father, like son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish." Instead of needing an Ark of the Covenant like Jesus, we become the physical manifestations of God's presence in this world. We are bearing the glory of God and we have seen it with our own eyes in the people sitting next to us.

Seeing God's glory gives us great reason to celebrate. So, returning to our story, we meet David returning God's presence in the Ark of the Covenant to Zion, leaping and dancing before the Lord with all his might. So unabashedly joyful, so immodestly expressing himself and caught up in the moment that even his wife judges him with contempt. But David is undeterred. He puts the Ark in a tent that he built for it, and he makes burnt offerings to God to atone for Israel's sins. Then he makes offerings of wellbeing.

This can also be translated as peace offerings, which were distributed among the gathered community and sharing the food from the wellbeing offering prompted the Israelites to acknowledge all the miracles in their lives and to give gratitude for them. Later in Israel's history, there would come a time when they didn't have the resources to make these food offerings. The rabbis would teach them to instead sacrifice the offerings of their hearts. The rabbis would show the people that they didn't need external representations like animals or grain to express their thanksgiving for the wellbeing they had in God, or to express their desire for God's peace, because God's presence was already within them, making God's peace and wellbeing available to them.

Today, Jewish tradition has moved from offering sacrifices to offering prayers. Rabbi Nema Kelman, Dean of Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, shares about being in a Jewish gathering when the

speaker asked everyone to turn to the person next to them and to name what they were thankful for. Rabbi Kelman reflects on this saying, "Suddenly we went from a convention hall to a sacred space. I had been sitting near a rabbinic colleague. I did not know well, yet in those few minutes, we were able to convey to each other not just gratitude, but a real sense of wholeness. This exercise demonstrated that when one honestly expresses gratitude, a sense of wellbeing takes a gentle hold." In other words, just naming what was already in their hearts, like a spoken prayer, and offering it to one another became a way of experiencing wellbeing.

We are coming together for a celebration after our service. Everyone is welcome to stay in honor of my time at St. James, and we'll be sharing shrimp and other food offerings. Maybe you could consider sharing what you're grateful for with whomever you find yourself sitting next to or talking to and noticing if wellbeing takes a gentle hold of you.

Allow me to go first. In reflecting on my tenure at St. James, I'm so grateful to have been part of this community for the last two years, to have been supported through both of my ordinations and so powerfully affirmed in my calling to the priesthood. I'm so grateful to have witnessed Christ being made manifest through the people in this room, through your dedication and your service, and your care for one another and for your community.

When I consider the many miracles in my life, I think of facilitating the church's sacraments, our weekly Eucharist, weddings, funerals, confirmation, baptism, and being part of those thin spaces when God's grace becomes tangible. We are transformed by encountering it in small but profound increments. I feel deeply grateful for your generosity, the wellbeing offerings you have given me of thoughtful notes and cards, flowers and gifts, and even supporting my future pilgrimage to the Camino de Santiago.

I'm grateful for all the ways that you have strengthened my spirit and increased my own

sense of peace and wellbeing. Finally, I'm grateful for the miracle of seeing the glory of God in each one of you. As this chapter comes to a close and we experience the discomfort and sadness as well as the excitement and hope of going through a transition and facing change, may we also celebrate like David and his throngs of people, the ways that we have shared God's presence with one another.

May we celebrate that God will continue to be present in us and through us just as the glory of God is mirrored back to us in every person that we encounter. Amen.