

Sermon 2/27/22
“Brain Fog”
Psalm 99
Luke 9:28-36
ACC
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Today is our last Sunday before Lent. Purple banners will replace Epiphany white banners this week. The green shoots of crocus and daffodils are peeking out of the frozen ground.

Today has been set aside as Mental Health Awareness Sunday. Paulo asked me, as part of the lay preacher team, to present the sermon, partly because I am, was until retirement, a clinical social worker in private psychotherapy practice.

In the late 90's, mental health providers and scientists were integrating brain research and trauma. That appealed to me, I realized that it was difficult to work with client's stress reaction and PTSD through talk therapy alone.

Overwhelming experiences are held in the body not the mind. Today, this thoroughly researched brain theory has become mainstream and has revolutionized how we understand the brain and how we work with trauma — a whole body awareness approach, not only noticing thoughts in our head but also noticing what is going on in our whole body.

We can respond with a greater capacity for suffering without falling apart, which, in turn helps us to become a more stable society.

The body has great wisdom. The Christian religion is embodied by “the Word made flesh.” We engage with God not merely with reason or mind, we engage God with our whole body. Notice what happens when we pray, — do we become grounded, calm, focused, does our breathing change? Does our heart rate decrease?

Luke's passage today, and to understand many bible passages, I look through the lens of our very efficient brains. We all have one, we wouldn't be here without our nervous system.

The nervous systems of Peter, James, and John, and I imagine many of us if we were in their sandals, became overwhelmed, dysregulated, and trembling at the sight of the transfiguration. Luke describes them as “terrified.” They had never witnessed such an event— dazzling light emanating from Jesus in a time when only sun, moon, and fire provided light.

Great Italian Renaissance artists rendered interpretations of the transfiguration on canvas.— Jesus in dazzling white, Elijah and Moses flanked on each side of him. Grappling on the ground are the three disciples, terrified at the sight, blinded by the light.

Peter doesn’t know how to respond to what he witnessed. He wants to stay on the mountain and pitch a tent, three tents in fact—one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. He is not rational, Peter can not process what is before his eyes.

The disciples heard and saw many clues to what was to become of Jesus in the days ahead, however, they had to figure this out on their own. It was a bumpy road.

It may help to understand Peter’s reaction to the transfiguration by understanding our nervous system. I want to briefly show you a summarized version of how Dan Siegel, child psychiatrist, so aptly explains his hand model of the three part brain and the brain’s survival function:

Our arm is the brain stem, or spinal cord, what we are born with and what we share with animals, it is called the reptilian brain. Autonomic nervous system regulates breathing, heart rate, digestion, In threat, it automatically goes in to fight or flight or freeze mode. It is our survival. Dan Siegel calls it our “downstairs brain.” Try telling a lizard or a toddler to “calm down”. The downstairs brain does not respond to language.

Next to develop at 18 months and continues to develop, is the limbic part of the brain—the fire alarm, the emotional center. Toddlers operate from this part—and at times so do we.

Later the top part of the brain, the neo cortex, develops, the “upstairs brain.” This part employs calm, curiosity, clarity, compassion, courage, language rationality. This is the part of the brain that keeps us in connection with ourselves and our relationships.

We need all parts of the brain, if we are in high stress, we flip our lid, our reptilian brain automatically takes over for survival but when the threat is over, we want to be flexible and return to the upstairs brain to calm, connectedness, compassion. However, some people can get stuck in their downstairs brain as if there is always a threat.

The reptilian brain does not know the difference between a real threat and a perceived threat, our upstairs brain **does** know the difference. Trauma can get stuck in the body long after the threat is gone—a car accident, domestic abuse, serious illnesses, war. Take, for instance, those soldiers who fought in Vietnam, the triggering sound of a helicopter can send them hiding behind their living room sofa. “Then and Now” Then, the past, and now, the present, become merged into one and the past can feel like the present.

We can begin to uncouple our then, our past, experiences, to our present. How? We can pause and notice when our downstairs brain is activated and pay attention when we are in our higher brain of calm, curiosity, connection, rationality.

Peter wasn’t in his upstairs brain at the time that he witnessed the transfiguration. I would describe Peter’s behavior as a fight response. Peter was not making sense, he didn’t comprehend the dazzling white garment of heaven. He missed so many clues. Understandably. Peter was in survival mode. And who are we to judge Peter? The bible us tells us the whole story of God’s plan. Peter doesn’t know the whole story—yet.

I see, but I do not understand.

When the reptilian brain is running the show, we react with either a flight response, which includes behaviors of withdrawal, depression, and hopelessness, or the fight response in which we can exhibit a behavior range from anger, rage, mania, or even elation. I had always wanted an example of an overwhelming event that triggered elation, other than

winning the lottery or earning a Gold Medal in an Olympic event.Elation is what Peter seemed to experience. To Jesus, it may have come across as “giddy.” Peter wanted to please Jesus.

Although a giddy, blundering, nonsensical idea to build 3 tents, Peter’s thoughtless automatic reaction was actually normal, after all, this was an abnormal event. What the three disciples saw was not your run of the mill ordinary day.

Sometimes we blurt out things we regret later, sometimes our behavior seems to come out of the blue. Our downstairs brain, our autonomic nervous system, is in charge. And when we are aware of what is happening in our bodies, we can learn to name it. Dan Siegel calls this “name it to tame it.”

God had to intervene here, shake things up a bit. Despite all the clues and words spoken about Jesus’s impending departure, the disciples could not comprehend the messages. God’s bellowing voice in the cloud was trying to reassure the disciples that Jesus must suffer and they must obey and listen to what his Chosen One says. “Listen!” Listen with your whole body, not only your ears.

They were in a fog, a brain fog. They had no words to describe what they had just witnessed. In fact they were silent on their own accord. They descended the mountain and told no one. In Mark and Matthew, the passages tell us that they were told to tell no one in order to protect Jesus. Not in Luke, maybe they were speechlessly silent.

And Peter, James, and John were not able to articulate what they saw until God’s plan was accomplished in Jerusalem.

Sometimes we are without words, unable to describe an overwhelming event until we have some perspective. All of our energy is geared toward survival, we don’t need words or digestion or calm. or curiosity, or peripheral vision when running away from a tiger—just straight forward fleeing or fighting.

Our nervous systems operate the same today as they did in Jesus’s time.

Just a few days ago, we see the courageous Ukrainian people taken by surprise and in disbelief that their country is being so violently attacked. Some are fleeing and some are signing up to fight against Putin's army. Some residents fled immediately and some paused and thought about how best they will survive— flee or stay and fight?

We are approaching the third year of COVID

Lethargy, lack of focus, poor concentration, not thinking clearly, a warped sense of time, brain fog. These responses to COVID are normal, and they are often pathologized. We are doing the best we can under the circumstances.

By the way, brain fog is not a medical condition, it is a symptom. It has been described as having all of your computer apps running in the background, taking up all of your memory, while managing and functioning to get through the day.

Think of what we have endured during these two years of a chronic Covid threat. The news feeds us data about the high rates of self-reported depression and anxiety. There IS a national mental health crisis. There have been little efforts to improve access to our mental health system. Yet, we are still showing up, we are here, we are resilient.

The very actions that kept us safe are the same actions that kept us disconnected from each other.

Loss of connection, to friends, family, neighbors, and death of loved ones, is a significant Covid side effect. Numbing with alcohol, drugs, worry, and excessive amounts of social media are counterproductive. Numbing disengages us further from personal interaction and self awareness.

When the fog of Covid has lifted and we feel a measure of safety, our individual and our collective nervous systems will begin to regulate again. Our brains will eventually adapt— be aware that we will not adapt at the same time, we shall honor our different strides.

Healing does not happen in a straight line.

How do we reenter from Covid safety measures as a church community? Our brains will be full of fits and starts. What will our kids need? What will our elders need? They may not know yet, but be ready to listen. Naming our experiences, storytelling, and listening will bring our thinking brain, our upstairs brain, back on line.

Play, laughter, storytelling, reflective listening will help us gain perspective of what we endured and how we survived this historical global virus.

Just as the disciples could not articulate at the time, eventually their stories came together, just as our stories will surface and come together.

Self-awareness, noticing what is going on inside, restoring the wisdom of our bodies, coupled with awareness of God's presence— these are our most valuable mental health strategies.

I ask that God be with us as we build capacity for deep suffering and that we remain stable with whatever life circumstances come our way— without falling apart. To be aware of our emotional state in order to support our children and our community. To be aware of when we are in our upstairs brain and when we are wavering and about to fall into our downstairs brain.

—Listen and honor the wisdom of our body.

May it be so.

