

When We See
Exodus 34.29-35, Luke 9.28-36
22nd Annual Jazz Worship
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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

I spent the summer of 1996 working as a baker at a camp in Weaverville, North Carolina. We made biscuits, bread, pies, cookies, and cakes from scratch every day starting at 5:00 in the morning. I gained 10 pounds in one month eating the food we prepared. Kind of like the very end of the carnival season when the last box of Popeye's has been polished off and there's no more king cake to be had, we were stuffed. On one of our last days together, the head baker who worked at the camp year round surprised the summer baking staff with a short hike up the mountain behind the kitchen, and we moved into a clearing to find a picnic laid out before us. Maybe it wasn't quite this way, but I remember the sky being completely clear and the grass especially green, the mid-July temperature was still not-too-hot in that Western North Carolina kind of way. And I vividly recall the sensation of sitting in a field with the bakery staff eating sandwiches of carrots, cucumbers, and sprouts. Sprouts! We delighted in alfalfa. After a month of bread and sugar, we devoured simple, clean, fresh, raw food in that open field with no rush, no anxiety. Gratitude and laughter permeated everything.

In the weeks before my son was born, I was gaining weight rapidly as my blood pressure got higher and higher until I was admitted into the hospital on bed rest. The doctor knew I would continue to get sicker if I didn't deliver soon, and so he arrived a month early at 5 pounds, 1 ounce. I had no idea what I was doing, and we owned no clothes small enough to fit his little 19" body. We weren't ready. Yet somewhere in that first 24 hours, he found his way into the bend of my neck beneath my chin, and we finally drifted in-and-out of sleep after a long, dizzying day. He was small, I was exhausted, we didn't have the perfect "going home" outfit to show off in flawless photographs. But we made it, and he was healthy, and everything about the sensation of his tiny body against mine was right; as though he had always been a part of me and forever would be.

Think of a moment in your life when time stood still. These moments are available to us all of the time, and I am certain you have had them. The beautiful kind when all is as it should be—when you'd live inside the feeling of the breeze or the blue of a sky if you could just figure out how. Or you have known a tragedy and loss and devastation that

forever changes the way you know the world. You see differently now than before. In big and small ways you wake up to your life.

As I was thinking through transcendent times in my own life, I asked friends about their experiences. One said, "I take walks at night through our neighborhood and feel connected to everything—like there is a secret pulse of life under the moon." Another sent a picture of a peaceful stroll on the beach with her family—feeling sane and grateful after a horrific year. One described the first time she set foot in Italy as a young adult and the feeling of coming home, "like I took my first breath," she said. While yet another described holding her newborn daughter in her arms as she took her last.

This last Sunday between Epiphany and Lent is reserved for ancient stories of encounters with God that transform the ones who stand before the Divine. In the first, Moses doesn't realize that his time before God has changed him to the point that others notice immediately. When he comes down from the mountain, the skin of his face is shining in a way that frightens the Israelites. The change that has come over him is so disturbing to those who knew him before this holy encounter that they ask him to cover his face with a veil because they don't want to see him directly. He has seen too much, and they have not yet seen enough.

In the second, Jesus and three disciples go "up on the mountain to pray." Already, we have a clue that something set apart and extraordinary may happen because of who is traveling, where they are going, and what they are going to do. But we are unprepared for how wild the story gets as Jesus' face, similar to Moses', is changed and even his clothes become white. Then Moses and Elijah are there—the representatives of the Law and the Prophets. And Peter, John, and James are witnesses—awake to see the glory of Jesus—the Divine presence that is shining on him like bright light. It is Peter who does, in fact, want to pause that moment and hold onto it forever before he and his friends, just like the Israelites, become afraid of what they have seen and heard. They have seen enough, and they cannot forget what they have witnessed.

These ancient stories are bizarre, and yet there is something in them that we already know. Sometimes we see and experience things that change the way we see the world forever, and we'll never be the same again because of what we have witnessed. And some of us—statistically at least half in this room—would add: we have glimpsed God in distinct and real ways because of a transcendent experience.

Since the Pew Research Center released a report on Religion and Public Life in 2012, I have read countless articles about the diminishing role of religion in American life with 23% of the population now identifying as “nones”—no particular religious affiliation.¹

Last month I heard an interview with theologian and writer Diana Butler Bass in which she explored the data from that Pew study and noted the nuanced questions found on page 27.² More interesting than “do you or don’t you identify with a religious group,” those interviewed were asked:

“Have you had a spiritual or mystical experience that has transformed your life?” One in two answered “yes.”

“Have you in the last week experienced a sense of deep peace and well being?” 65% answered “yes.”

“Have you in the last week experienced a sense of awe and wonder?” 52% answered “yes.”

“Do you primarily understand your life as a quest for meaning and purpose?” 75% answered “yes.”

Noting the themes of spirituality and connection, Bass said, “I looked at this report, and all of the newspapers are pitching the report as, ‘Religion is declining.’ And I’m reading page 27 and thought to myself, ‘But mysticism is rising!’”

The shift seems to be one of cultural awareness and location—where we anticipate finding truth has changed. Whereas 50 and 75 and 100 years ago the Church was expected to be the holding place of encounters with God and clergy were holy gatekeepers or brokers of Divine expression, people began to recognize that they had moments of awakening and awareness in ordinary life, away from big religious structures and official institutions. It is in the ordinary settings of carpool and grocery store and walks in the park and raising our kids that we are waking up to the Divine and recognizing peace, wonder, meaning, and purpose all around us.

With this in mind, Bass observed we are presently in a period of deep, transformational, spiritual awakening. She then asked, “Are we living not in the age of the decline of the Church but in the age of the rise of the mystics?”

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

² The RobCast—Rob Bell with Diana Butler Bass (January 21, 2016): <http://www.podbean.com/media/share/pb-8nq7v-5bf200/download>

She explores more of these ideas in her latest book *Grounded*, writing, “Spirituality is about personal experience—the deep realization that dirt is good, water is holy, the sky holds wonder; that we are part of a great web of life, our home is in God, and our moral life is entwined with that of our neighbor...The spiritual revolution [in which we presently find ourselves] is a protest movement against forms of religion that have lost the binding vision of peace, wisdom, and equanimity here on earth.”³

The pattern in the biblical story is trusted relationship which leads to transcendent experience which informs distinct action in the world. In the Luke story, we see a Jesus on the move—he’s gathering disciples outside of the traditional structure, teaching and healing in ways that make people both extremely curious and extremely nervous. Then he’s preparing the disciples, teaching and healing more, sending them out in pairs for more teaching and healing on their own, and all the while the curious and nervous crowds around them are growing. There begins to be this rhythmic swing between addressing the needs of the crowds and sending them away for time of quiet, feeding and teaching thousands, then retreating from them for prayer. In fact, these stories often occur in pairs to be understood against one another.

When the scene with bright light and Elijah and Moses was over, Jesus and his friends come down from the mountain, and a crowd is waiting and surrounds Jesus. That is, when the small group has gone away to a high and holy place and encountered God in a way that changes the way they see themselves and the whole world, they then return to their regular life where everyone is waiting for them. Everything is as it was before except now this group—including Jesus—sees everything differently.

In the crowd, a man gets Jesus’ attention and begs him to come look at his son. The boy, the man’s only child, is convulsing and foaming at the mouth. It is a violent scene, and Jesus heals the boy before the crowd. Then Luke reports, “all were astounded at the greatness of God.” The seeing, transforming work on the mountain immediately becomes public action in the healing of a vulnerable, innocent child.

Our spiritual experiences aren’t simply for our own private knowledge and individual path, they are tethering us to one another, to God, and to the world. Every sacred awakening becomes an opportunity for the good not just of ourselves but of every thing and person around us. Every sacred awakening becomes an opportunity for transformational action that astounds the world at the greatness of God.

³ Diana Buter Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution*, p. 238

I think this shift in understanding the spiritual life as an awakening available to all of us is very much at the heart of the Jesus story. Before we built fortresses of religious expression, we held shared stories of transcendent experience. We gathered for prayer and life together and a shared meal. We knew that our lives were linked and that we belonged to each other just as much as we belonged to God.

Friends, this opportunity to experience life with intention and awareness and to live in such a way that the world encounters the greatness of the Divine Source of us all—this opportunity is yours. Hear that invitation today as we consider these words from the dear Frederick Buechner,

“Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”

May it be so. Amen.