

SUMMARY: FAITH ENTERED/EXPERIENCED/ENGAGED (2/3)

(James 2:14-17)

As we saw last week, there is this essential link between our faith (1) how we enter what we believe, (2) how it affects us, and then (3) what we do about that - how we come to live them out. For our faith to be real it must impact us in terms of both what we experience and then how we actually live. **And so, we're looking at these 3 dimensions of our belief: How our faith in God through Jesus Christ is cognitively ENTERED/ how it is subjectively EXPERIENCED/ how it is practically ENGAGED, lived out!**

Last week we looked at how it is entered: ...just what exactly is it that we choose to believe, you know, about God? About ourselves? About creation? We shared how we believe faith in God is not so much about our having faith in some power outside of our everyday existence, as this powerful source of healing and reconciling love always already right here, pulsing the essential stuff of life within all creation, and in us! That's God as revealed in scripture by the historical Jesus, and sealed as present with us by God's own Holy Spirit in the everywhere-at-once-person-and-work of the risen Christ.

And so continuing with the second of these 3 dynamics as we look today at how we get to 'experience' what we believe? I understand that it was on March 18, 1958 that Thomas Merton was running errands in downtown Louisville when he had an experience that would change his life and come hugely to influence countless others. The spot is marked with a historical marker which, I understand, is the only one in the United States to mark a mystical experience. This is how Merton described it¹:

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious (false) self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud: I have the immense joy of being (hu)man, a member of a race in which God ...became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

Someone explained how: *...he was experiencing the glorious destiny that comes simply from being a human...united with God, not separated from the rest of the human race."*

Lori Erikson, described as a spiritual travel blog writer, writes how, as she visited that spot, she *'wasn't alone in remembering Merton. An older man and a young woman were there as well, and as I approached them I overheard him telling her the story of what had happened there, his voice barely audible above the sound of cars. It made me happy to see that I was not the only pilgrim that day at the busy intersection in Louisville. Merton's words still echo there, even after all the intervening years.*

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time."

How do we get to experience this? While I'm not sure we can ever engineer those special God-moment experiences – *they come as they come* – I do think we can choose to get in the way. We can choose to be fearful, suspicious of others, focus on ourselves and what we believe is good for just us and people who we feel are like us. I believe we can do that, blocking inclusive God-experiences ...even as I believe, positively, that we can help facilitate those experiences. I believe that we can have what Psalm 14 helpfully suggests are 'attitudes of expectation'. I think of Eugene Peterson's paraphrase where the psalmist describes God as looking around for those of us who are actually *God-expectant/God-ready*... ***GOD sticks God's head out of heaven. God looks around. ...looking for someone not stupid, one man, even, God-expectant, just one God-ready woman***ⁱⁱ. BE God-expectant/God-ready! EXPECT to have God-awareness break into our consciousness...

I think that's what the theologically conservative evangelical world so often gets right with their focus on having a personal relationship with the person of Jesus Christ - and it's what we so-called progressive or liberal Christians miss – the expectation of sacred encounter, of our most holy appreciation. I'm speaking about that sense of emotional, gut-wrenching/sheer wonder-evoking devotion that comes totally to affirm us in our relationships with God even as we encounter holiness spun through and within all of God's creation.

I think of those weekends away with the Alpha course when the focus was entirely on the life-impacting ministry of the Holy Spirit within our lives... The joy of prayerful expectation as we invited a rise within us of sacred awareness, like those disciples on Mt Tabor at the time of Jesus' transfiguration as they saw him shining like the sun. Many have had similar 'mountaintop' experiences –when the numinosityⁱⁱⁱ of God has had such an impact on them – God revealed as with us, awesome and intimate yet also ubiquitously at once everywhere.

But still, we all remain distrustful of anything that seems (what we describe) as too emotional, overly experiential. When it comes to our faith we typically prefer to mumble what we believe while just getting on with whatever social outreach or community justice projects we feel are necessary, and all the while risk missing out on being fueled by the whole reason for why any of this matters as much as it does – that it's because in all things we are actually wanting to be about worshipping Our 'most-breath-taking-and-everywhere-at-once-present-in-all-things' God.

I love what Fr James Finley^{iv} describes as an essential element of this: the ability to have '***long loving looks***' into any situation or relationship in which we may find ourselves – to look long and lovingly enough until we are able to pierce the illusion of all this fear & anger & selfish separation that we are so good at creating, to perceive instead reality as God has created it to be, as God intends it to be – all one sacred whole – one within the risen Christ.

It was Metropolitan Anthony Bloom who once said something like ‘if we aren’t able to experience God where we are, it’s pointless trying to find God anywhere else, because it isn’t the everywhere-and-always-present-God who is ever absent, it’s about us and our rising ability in Christ to be receptive enough to see.

Remember Jesus’ encounter with blind Bartimaeus in the Gospels^v: ***‘what do I most want from you Jesus, I WANT TO SEE! At 62 years old this year, I find that I’m rapidly and increasingly just too old to want to play religious games. Like that blind Bartimaeus on the roadside as Jesus passes by, I too want actually to see what I believe! More than just wanting to have it in my head, I want actually to experience it, and live it! Don’t you?’***

And so the question this week is what can we intentionally be doing to set about actually experiencing our place within that one essential unity of God’s love? Next week we’ll be looking at the difference this must make to our living... But for today, we’re wanting to be God-expectant! Let’s expect to see our place within the altogether one, risen holiness of Christ even as he may come to be revealed to us in some pretty unexpected places, often even perhaps DESPITE the unholiness of those places...

How has your faith actually affected you?

**The light of Jesus Christ is very real and totally shining all the time.
Please God, may we be given what we need to believe it, know it, and live it
Amen**

Rev Robin Jacobson

ⁱ [Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander](#)

ⁱⁱ The Message

ⁱⁱⁱ *Wikipedia describes ‘Numinous’ as a term derived from the Latin numen, meaning “arousing spiritual or religious emotion; mysterious or awe-inspiring.” I understand that the term was given its present sense by the German theologian and philosopher Rudolf Otto in his influential 1917 German book *The Idea of the Holy*.*

^{iv} Senior staff member of Richard Rohr’s faculty at the Center for Action and Contemplation

^v [Mark 10:46-52,Luke 18:35-43](#)