

Luminous Spirituality

Exodus 34: 29-35 Luke 9: 28-36

It was great to see so many people at the “Belief” video and discussion on Thursday night, a rainy, getting colder, unpleasant kind of night. I think folks enjoyed the stories presented in four segments, following people as they engaged what they believe and tried to make it prosper in their own lives.

Cha Cha – yes, that’s her name – is a Pentecostal Christian college student who had been raped, and thereafter felt disconnected or even abandoned by God. We followed her to a youth retreat where she found a healing process taking place, culminating in a baptism with dozens of others in a muddy creek that was like a rebirth for her.

Reshma was a very successful health technology professional in Chicago who kept up her Hindu tradition, but who truly felt that her life was not where it needed to be. Something spiritual was ailing her being. That spiritual malaise led her to quit her job, say farewell to her family, and journey to India to join in a mass Hindu celebration that culminates in bathing in the Ganges River. As she connected with other seekers and believers and then immersed herself in the sacred waters of the river, she, too, was spiritually reborn, connected once again to the ground of life and being.

Mendel, a thirteen year old Jewish boy, son of an Orthodox rabbi, is met in Budapest, Hungary on the day of his Bar Mitzvah. He takes up his family’s tradition, setting himself on an adult path of faith that would influence and guide his life’s course. He becomes connected with many generations of believers in a witness to the survival of a tradition that was most recently threatened by the Nazis who killed 3/4s of the Jewish population in Budapest.

Finally, turning to the Australian wilderness, we met Terry, an Aboriginal elder stricken with terminal cancer who called himself “the last singer,” the last bearer of the Aboriginal spiritual tradition that extends tens of thousands of years. He is seen passing the mantle of singer, keeper of the sacred stories, and steward of the Aboriginal spiritual tradition to his 11 year old grandson Lucas. They journey the land as Terry tells Lucas about the spiritual presence in the sacred landscape around them, culminating in a celebration that marks Lucas as the new signer, the new storyteller in the tradition.

In each case, the theme of “seekers” is portrayed as each one gets joined to their belief tradition in new ways, re-connecting for the first two young women, and then the two boys taking their place within their faith. All experience the unique spirituality that surrounds their faith understanding, reaching beyond themselves and across time into the tradition of their elders as well as reaching beyond their common awareness to what is spiritually transcendent.

We may understand these as “mountaintop experiences,” even if there isn’t any actual mountain in any of these stories. Our scriptures on the other hand take us to the

actual mountaintop in both passages. This is pretty much how the term derived. The journey to the top of the mountain becomes a meeting place between the self and the sacred, an arduous trial that is rewarded with the blessing of new life, new identity, new being.

The opposite of the mountaintop experience is the valley experience. If anyone has had both of these experiences, you probably know that the journey between the two can be can stunningly short. How long does it take to go from the mountaintop all the way down to the valley?

Former heavyweight boxer James (Quick) Tillis was a cowboy from Oklahoma who also boxed in Chicago in the 1980s, fighting Mike Weaver, Earnie Shavers, and even a young Mike Tyson. He remarked about his first day in Chicago arriving from Tulsa. “I got off the bus with two cardboard suitcases under my arms in downtown Chicago and stopped in front of the Sears Tower. I put my suitcases down, and I looked up at the Tower and I said to myself, ‘I’m going to conquer Chicago.’ When I looked down, the suitcases were gone.” That’s the speedy trip from the mountaintop to the valley. You’ll see how this plays out as we turn to the scriptures.

After returning to the mountaintop to get two more tablets from God, Moses comes down from there, returning to his people, but he is literally radiant. His face is glowing like a light bulb, I suppose.

Fear is the response from Aaron and the people. Recall how consistently this is portrayed in scripture, the immediate response to an awareness of the sacred intruding on human affairs is a sense of fear. The divine messenger is always saying to the trembling mortal, “Fear not.” Presumably Moses said the same ‘fear not’ thing to get people to approach him.

But it wasn’t a temporary thing for Moses; this glowing business didn’t stop. It was such a problem that Moses decided to wear a veil over his face most times, except in the presence of God, and when he’s addressing the people. It seems kind of silly to hide this radiance behind a veil, while at times revealing his facial brightness anyway. Was there any doubt about what was behind the veil? It doesn’t seem like the veil made things any more *normal*.

Moses’ luminous face is a sign of God’s presence that now rests among God’s people. You’ll recall how God had traveled through the wilderness with his people as a pillar of fire and a pillar of smoke or cloud. The wilderness journey is coming to an end as the Torah Law is handed down to Moses. God’s presence with his people is now taking a new form as God’s people begin a new phase of their journey. Moses is the vehicle for this transition. Moses is truly reflecting the luminous spirituality of God, a spiritual connection that all can see.

Like the people portrayed in the “Belief” video, there is a new spiritual connection being established, a new phase in the spiritual experience. But this presence can be disconcerting and uncomfortable, both for the one who bears it, and for those around

them as they encounter someone who has been changed. The veil is an attempt, albeit perhaps a feeble one, to make this new spirituality normal. The luminous spirituality can be off-putting and problematic, and we find ways to cope with a new reality for ourselves and for those around us.

In the story of the transfiguration, we find some of the same elements in place.

Jesus and his inner circle of Peter, James and John went up to the mountaintop to pray. Not only is Jesus' face changed there, but his clothes become a dazzling white. In this miraculous spectacle, Jesus is joined by Moses and the prophet Elijah. One astute veteran Bible student asked me once, how did Peter know that these figures were Moses and Elijah? Obviously, they employed the ancient tradition of wearing nametags. While Moses and Elijah respectively represent the promise of the Law and the promise of the Messiah, it's also true that they had both met the direct presence of God, the glory of God himself. That they should be present to bear witness to God in Jesus here is natural.

In this wildly abnormal situation, Peter tries to create a semblance of normalcy, covering up the bizarre by offering to build three shelters. Even Luke adds his own mocking comment as an editorial remark: "[Peter] did not know what he was saying." Not that James and John are much better. They don't utter a word. Despite Peter's efforts to create the normal and contain an unmanageable situation, the cloud comes and the voice within it declares, *This is my Son whom I have chosen; listen to him!*

God won't let them hide behind the veil of normalcy. God won't let them try to empty the sacred spiritual power of the moment with a lame attempt to cover it up and control it and continue as if nothing had happened. God makes clear to them what should have been obvious by now; Jesus is God's chosen Son and 'contrary to what you've been doing, fellas, you really ought to listen to him.'

When all of this is done, the text explains that the three disciples kept this event *to themselves*. Oi! That was hardly the idea. They were witnesses to the transfiguration so that they could give witness to the others, getting on track with Jesus and his sacred mission. Again, they didn't want to relate this abnormal event to anyone else since they would seem wacky. Better to just keep it quiet. Just cover it up; put a veil over it.

In these instances of luminous spirituality, a vital spiritual connection has been made. In these witnesses, we are able to have an illustration of God's presence with God's people. No, we don't all walk around with glowing faces, or shine forth in robes of brilliant light. However, the experience of spiritual awakening can make all things bright when they had become dull, and make all things new and alive when they had become stale and deadly.

People have tried to replicate this mountaintop spiritual experience, but they typically miss the mark. Granting ourselves permission to consume in self-indulgence, believing that we will satisfy what hungers within is one foolish method that's been tried many times. Our culture and its obsession with acquisition is a false god that promises

joy and blessing when you get stuff. A healthy spirituality can see through that, recognizing how the reverse is true; joy and blessing come from a spiritual inspiration to generous charity and grace, giving it away and giving yourself away.

We may get caught by the portrayal of the good life and our culture's imagery of success and satisfaction, believing the gospel of advertising and marketing, that doing certain things will bring peace, healing, and new life. They can be very good at stirring the froth of spirituality, engaging the emotions, and tugging at the heart without ever dealing with anything of consequence. The spirituality of the gospel of Jesus speaks to whole other reality, a transcendent spirituality that seeks to transform self and society with peace, with spiritual power, and with sacred promise.

The light of God's presence is empowering, emboldening, and indeed transforming. A luminous spirituality is the radiance that has shined from people of faith through the ages. Outstanding people had the transcendent courage and deep spiritual grounding to move mountains, challenge empires, defeat the powers of deprivation, despair and destruction. They knew oppression, saw exploitation, and had the spiritual audacity to shine the light of liberation and strive sacrificially to bring justice and peace.

Such witnesses wore the brightness of a sacred faith and lived in its glow, not on Sundays, not for a season, but as the directing beam for their life's work and journey. Had they remained behind a veil, had they conformed themselves to something "normal," we never would have known them and history would be the worse.

May we know that God has come to be with us, his people. May we lift any veil from our awareness and come out to live in the light, to reflect a luminous spirituality that God is indeed with us. May we celebrate the brilliant glory of God who stands with us and empowers us to be faithful, vital, and bold servants of our Lord Jesus.