

Religion as Experiential



Luke 9:28 "Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly (the disciples there) saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to Jesus. They appeared in glory and were speaking of Jesus' departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem."

I, for one, have always enjoyed the columns in the New York Times written by David Brooks, who notes that when he was an agnostic, he thought faith was primarily about belief. Being religious was about having a settled conviction that God existed

and thus believing that the stories in the Bible were true, he thought. So, he looked for books and arguments that would convince himself rationally that God was either real or not real.

Some people are spiritual but not religious; he noted, but during that time, you could say he was religious but not spiritual. When faith finally tiptoed into his life it didn't come through information or persuasion but, at least at first, it came through numinous experiences, he wrote. Numinous experiences like those alluded to in each of the scripture Readings today. These are the scattered moments of awe and wonder that wash over most of us unexpectedly from time to time. Looking back over the decades, he remembered rare transcendent moments: at the foot of a mountain in New England at dawn, at Chartres Cathedral in France, looking at images of the distant universe, or of a baby moving in the womb. In those moments, he had a sense that he was in the presence of something simply amazing and perhaps overwhelming, something that was somewhat hidden and mysterious. For David Brooks, these experiences didn't answer questions or settle any religious controversy; on the contrary, they opened up much greater mysteries for him. They revealed wider dimensions of existence than he had ever imagined before, and aroused a desire within him, to be opened up even further. Wonder and awe are the emotions we feel when we

are in the presence of that vast something just beyond the grasp of our understanding.

In his book "My Bright Abyss," the poet Christian Wiman writes, "Religion is not made of these moments; religion is the means of making these moments part of our life." Such moments hit us with the force of joy, he writes. 'Happiness' is what we experience as we celebrate the minor achievements of self --- of winning a prize, for example, but 'joy' is what we feel when we are encompassed by that presence that transcends the self. Like the title of C.S. Lewis' autobiography, we are at such moments "surprised by joy!" We can create happiness, but we are seized by joy, often unexpectedly --- by some sensation of intoxicating spiritual beauty or mystery, some contact with radical wonder and goodness, a glimpse into the hidden reality of things beyond, which doesn't give us new ideas; rather it seems to make real ancient truths that had lain unbidden at the depth of our consciousness. We are embraced by a moral order, Brooks writes. What we call good and evil are not just preferences that this or that set of individuals invent according to their tastes, as I suggested in last week's sermon. David Brooks writes, rather, slavery, cruelty, rape, for instance, are wrong at all times and in all places because they are an assault on something that is sacred in all times and in all places, human dignity. And inversely, self-sacrificial love, and overwhelming generosity,

and mercy, and justice are not just pleasant to see, writes Brooks. They are the fixed spots on an eternal compass, things we can orient our life toward.

We are all embraced within this moral universe that gives meaning to history and to our lives, he notes. He once likened his gradual, tedious process of coming to faith to riding on a train. Gradually over the course of the journey he found that he had simply left the realm of atheism behind. At some point he had crossed an unseen border into a new land and new experiences. Sometimes people hear about his religious journey and ask him about his "conversion," but that word is a relic from the rationalist mentality, he says – as if he traded one belief system for another. The process, he writes, felt more like inspiration or simple beauty, as though someone had breathed life into unexpected moments of our lives.

It's been 11 years since his first so-called experience of 'quickenings,' and he spent those years trying to grow in understanding and faith. The most surprising thing he has learned since then, is that "faith" is the wrong word for what he experienced. The word "faith" implies possession of something, he argued, whereas he experienced faith instead as a yearning, a yearning for something beautiful that he could sense but never fully grasp. For him, his faith is more about longing and thirsting, than it is about knowing and possessing.

Sometimes he felt pulled by a goodness that seems so grand and so far-off, a divine luminosity that hovers just over the distant horizon. Sometimes he felt pulled by concrete moments of holy delight, that he personally witnessed right in front of his face – like the sight of a rabbi laughing uproariously as his children pile over him during a Shabbat meal, or the sight of a Catholic priest at a poor church looking radiantly to heaven as he holds the bread of Christ above his head. He found that the most compelling proofs of God's love come in moments of radical delight, or radical goodness – most especially, he said, in the example of those who serve the marginalized in our communities with postures of self-emptying love.

Still some days this longing for God feels like loneliness, he wrote, separation from the thing desired. But mostly it feels like a slow venture toward something unbelievably worth wanting, some ultimate concern. "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward that which is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus," St. Paul writes to the Philippians. The theologian Paul Tillich puts it more philosophically: "Man is driven toward faith by his awareness of the infinite to which he belongs."

Desire pushes Brooks onward and the path is confusing and sometimes discouraging, but mostly the longing for the holy is a nice kind of longing to have. For it turns out that our

experience of desire is ultimately shaped by the object of our desire. If we desire money, our desire will always seem pinched, and if we desire fame, our desire will always be desperate. But if the object of our desire is simple generosity itself, then our desire for it will open up new dimensions of existence that we had never perceived before.

Brooks wrote that he had to keep reminding himself that faith is more like falling in love than it is like finding the answer to some complicated questions of life. One has to accept the fact that when you assent to faith, you're assenting to putting your heart at the center of life, not your head, and the best moments are giddily romantic. It's a reminder that we are rarely changed by learning new information, but we are dramatically changed by acquiring new loves. Faith is experiential, he concludes. Faith is experiential.

"As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God." That's the opening line of Psalm 42. Years ago, Brooks thought that all this yearning and panting would propel him into the glorious land of the believers, and that once he got there, where he'd taste serenity, stillness, and peace. But some people who are more spiritually mature than he, report that the desiring isn't a preparation for faith; desire is faith itself. "The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing," St. Augustine once wrote.

When religion is seen as belief, then the believer lives on a continuum between belief and doubt. But when religion is seen as a longing, then the believer lives on the continuum between intensity and more intensity. That's the continuum Brooks says he now lives on these days. And it's easy to let the embers of that desire cool down. "The danger," the Jewish mystic Simone Weil wrote, "is not lest the soul should doubt whether there is any bread, but lest, by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry." We humans are hungry for the divine; we hunger for God.

Most holiness Brooks notes is small and unobtrusive. It is seen perchance in another person's simple countenance, in a way of their paying attention to the world that is different from most others, that is noteworthy by their patience, their peace, their kindness, their joy, or their love. It is sometimes seen in others, as they do small things with great affection. Serving dinner is a material act, but hospitality is a spiritual gift. It is seen too, Brooks argues, in those who are able to love the people who are hard to love – the criminals, the outcasts, the strangers. Do we live in a cold, meaningless universe? No, there is an underlying source of love pervading everything. And the desire for God appears to be insatiable, as the early church father Gregory of Nyssa wrote that heaven itself is endless longing. That's the heaven I want to be in, concludes Brooks. He

is grateful to live in an enchanted world, to live toward someone or something that he can seek and serve. "I've been grateful to have to learn and relearn yet another startling truth," he writes, "that faith is about yearning but it's not about striving. You can't earn God's love with good behavior or lofty thoughts, because he's already given it to you as the lavish gift that you don't deserve." Such is the mystery of life. AMEN.