

Religious Experience and Faith in God

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Some of the sermons that I've most enjoyed writing are those that have featured Blair or Marge Woodside, whether it has been Blair's experience in serving in many ways at home with Marge, or his leading in various ways at Zion, or celebrating milestone achievements like anniversaries, or the eventual but sad occasions of funerals. Recently, within the year, Blair came into my office and told me of an experience he had here within the confines of Zion's Sanctuary. He felt as if he had entered into the very presence of God's holiness, enveloped completely by a sense of absolute immediacy. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced at Zion or anyplace else. Rudolph Otto called it *the experience of the holy* in an influential book he wrote back in 1917 entitled *The Idea of the Holy*. In Latin, the technical term is the *numen tremendum*, referring to an encounter with the truly numinous, the mysterious, something *wholly other*, outside the range of normal experience, indescribable, at once fascinating yet terrifying, filling us with awe and dread, all at once. Few people experience it, but enough to know what it is and how to describe it. Some have called it our experience of *the mystical*, something unlike anything we have otherwise encountered, unique, in a category by itself, where we are overwhelmed by a sense of astonishment, which leaves us speechless. Blair could agree with all of these descriptions, but still he was puzzled. What does it mean?

One classic instance in the Bible that depicts this kind of experience is found in Isaiah, the sixth chapter, beginning with the first verse. It is an odd mixture of ordinary history and extraordinary experience. Isaiah begins, "In the year that king Uzziah died": that's ordinary history, a date on a calendar, to be memorized, and regurgitated for a pop quiz in a classroom at school. Then he continues, "I saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple" – his train refers to attendants, seraphim, cherubim, daemons, no dragons, and angels; "and the angels cried, 'Holy,' the angels cried 'Holy', the angels cried, 'Holy is His Name!'" Now that's extraordinary, one of a kind, categorially unique, the *numen tremendum*, a fascinating mystery. What did Isaiah do? How did he respond? What did he say? He was overwhelmed with dread. "Woe is me! I am lost! For I am a man with unclean lips, living in the midst of a people with unclean lips.... and yet, I have seen the King, the Lord of hosts, God Almighty!" The experience left Isaiah exhilarated, feeling exalted, yet, at the very same moment, humbled to his knees, filled with a sense of his sinful humanity, his mere mortality.

Another classic Biblical incident describing an encounter with the holy, the *numen tremendum*, is found in this morning's Gospel, the mountaintop experience known as the Transfiguration. "Jesus took Peter, James and John with him to a high mountain. And he was transfigured before them, right before their own eyes, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them; and there were two ghosts

standing alongside of him, Moses and Elijah – the Spirit of the Law and the Prophets – just standing there talking with Jesus.” (Mark 9:2-5) What does it mean? What should we do? Peter responds in the same way that many others had, in the same way that we might respond. He sensed that he was standing on holy ground, in sacred space. “We’ve got to remember this moment. Let’s build a shrine, commemorating the transfiguration of Jesus, along with the visitation of Moses and Elijah!” (Mark 9:6) Jesus himself doesn’t dwell much on the concept of building dwellings, or shrines. He is more focused on returning from the mountain to life in the real world with a message to proclaim, a ministry to pursue, disciples to train, a church to empower. In truth, this has been the age-old lesson taken from our text. Don’t just dwell on the mountain top experience. Head back down into the everyday world of real life, where your service is needed, where your gifts are valued, where you can make a difference for folks who need God’s love and ours. That surely is the right theme and a good direction. But I’ve got to tell you, I think this would be too easy, busying ourselves with the busyness of life and ministry when there may be something more important going on with this moment on the mountain, this glimpse of the radically other holiness of God’s presence manifest right in the midst of our ordinary, sinful, everyday lives limited by the mortality of our flesh and blood.

Rudolph Otto was an important figure in the history of theology because he directed our study of God away from in-house discussions about church doctrines toward a scientific examination of religious experience. He was fascinated to discover that this experience of God’s humbling holiness has been described throughout history, across cultures, and in virtually all religions. While Otto’s point in moving toward a more scientific study of religion and theology was to examine our *experience* of God’s holiness, he was not talking about the experiences that are covered on televised specials with Ernest Angley, where foreheads are tapped and the Spirit’s power is released on cue. That is a kind of religious experience, odd, to be sure, but not categorially unique, not unlike anything that can otherwise be experienced, since all we need do is change the channel to find others tapping foreheads and releasing the Spirit’s power on cue, just in time for a commercial break! These demonstrations of the Spirit’s power are more controlled events than what is meant by the *numen tremendum*, which is what Otto was talking about, and what Isaiah described, and what Peter, James and John experienced in today’s Gospel.

What is more, that is what Blair Woodside encountered here at Zion. It is not as if Blair is a known eccentric, or that he was in the height of his youth drinking in everything he can experience. Blair is a man whose wisdom and judgment many respect, and honored veteran, successful in business, trusted by the employees he hired and the owners he served at the Hoover Company, a well read, well reasoned, well liked man, who, above all else, was known for his faithfulness in love, in caring, and in respecting the sanctity and the dignity of human life. That’s what makes it so extraordinary, that someone who wasn’t seeking anything more than perhaps God’s quiet approval of a life well lived should in his eighty-eighth year experience something that would leave him speechless to understand what had happened, but anxious, and even eager, to have it happen again!

That is the *numen tremendum*. These experiences have served through the years and across cultures as vivid reminders of our humanity, of our mortality, reminders of the fact that we are not divine, but creatures, destined to die, limited by our flesh and blood, limited by our duration on earth, limited in what we can know and do. Sure, we are reminded of these things in many ways virtually everyday. But experiences like the ones that Rudolph Otto described, like the one Isaiah experienced, and the disciples encountered, these experiences couple awful reminders of our humility with awesome, almost electrifying, proofs of a power greater than ourselves, coming at us from a dimension we cannot comprehend, occupying a level of reality that is truly beyond us.

As Lutherans, we are not a tradition that likes to hang our hat on experience, the on-again, off-again fickleness of emotional states. Lutherans are not among those who would insist on verifying the authenticity of your faith by requiring you to speak in tongues, seeing to it that you get slain in the spirit, asking about whether you have experienced a miracle, or facilitated one. We rely on our minds to think through what God wants us to do, and on our managerial expertise to design the programs that will get the job done. But here on the eve of Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent, as a bridge between Epiphany and Easter, we preserve a text that cannot be intellectualized into abstraction, or turned into a program we can design and then do. We focus on an experience that is irreducibly and undeniably an experience of God's holiness. The veil of our limitations is lifted for a moment, as we encounter the *numen tremendum*, an experience that is exhilarating, exalting, humbling, terrifying, all at the same time. We call this day, this bridge, the Festival of the Transfiguration, with glorious white as the color of the day. It is interesting that in an age where reason reigns and science rules, this day tells us that it is still foolish, after all those centuries, to say that there is no God. That is the inherited wisdom of the Scriptures, found in Psalms 14:1 and 53:1.

Beyond this, all we can say is that for those who do acknowledge God's existence, it is sad that they might not know that this God is the gracious, forgiving, and loving presence that we encounter in Jesus. I think that this is what Steve Dague has been trying to tell us with his reflections on the one-year anniversary of a fall that left him almost dead on his garage floor back on February 17, 2008. His is the first of forty meditations to appear in our Daily Devotional Guide for Lent. Toward the end, he tells us that he does not focus on the sense of the tragic when he thinks back to that fall. Instead, he can't help but rejoice in what he now knows to be an incredible truth, that his faith and belief in God's presence have been strengthened beyond anything he might have imagined. Steve's long journey in rehab since that fall has been an encounter with the *numen tremendum*, which, for him, took the form of the gentle touch of a hand on his shoulder, comforting and astonishing, real and eerie, while he still lay paralyzed in his bed in the Intensive Care Unit at Aultman Hospital. That is what Steve is telling us when he writes, "I want to share with you these feelings of the miraculous, wonderful, and absolute magnificence of God's love and presence." That awesome presence, that warm touch and powerful hand "is there for all of us" in the life we share ... in Jesus' name. Amen