

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Scott Kenefake, Interim Senior Pastor
“Moving from Secondhand to Firsthand Religious Experience”
2 Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9
Transfiguration of the Lord
February 11, 2018

²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

This week, while thinking about today’s lectionary readings, I was reminded of a story I heard a few years ago from the Church Historian, **Diana Butler Bass**.

She was on a flight from Washington, D.C. to Los Angeles and a successful executive was seated next to her. The executive told Butler Bass about her work and asked, “*What do you do?*”

She replied, “I write about religion and spirituality.” The executive laughed, and said, “**Religion** isn’t a very popular word, is it?”

Butler Bass agreed.

“I used to be religious,” the executive explained. “I grew up Catholic, but left the church over the sex-abuse scandal. The church doesn’t make much sense in the world as it is now. But I still believe in God. I’d say I’m a spiritual person.”

“Lots of people tell me that they are ‘spiritual but not religious,’” Butler Bass said, laughing a little. “What do you mean by that? Who is God to you?”

The executive shared with Butler Bass how she found God in *nature*, in her *relationships* with family, *friends*, and with *workmates*, and in the *work* she does in the world. She told how God was present to her through *doing justice* (serving hungry people at the local shelter), *contemplative worship* (occasional attendance at an evening Jazz Service at an Episcopal Church), and offering *hospitality* toward those in need (caring for those who were doubting, ill, or grieving among her own friends).

Intelligent—and obviously compassionate—the executive understood her own work as a *vocation* to create a more *just* and *inclusive world*.

Sensing Butler Bass would know what she was talking about, she threw in a few theologians and Catholic saints, like Thomas Aquinas and Dorothy Day, to explain her perspectives on spirituality and social justice.

“Why don’t you join the church with the Jazz Service? Butler Bass asked.

“I’ve thought about that,” the executive continued. She also shared that she sometimes felt guilty about not attending church anymore. “But ‘joining’ an *organization* strikes me as a strange way to relate to God. And the institutional church is so broken, so hypocritical. It has wounded so many people. I just can’t do that again with any honesty.” She paused, seeming to wonder if she should continue. “But these other things—the Spirit all around, caring and praying for people, working for a better world—they *ground* me.”¹

Now, if you listened carefully to the executive, you may have heard an important *cultural shift* in the way that increasing numbers of people in North America, the larger Western World, and Globally are experiencing God in the contemporary world—a shift that traditional religious institutions have either ignored or failed to grasp: leaving the institutional church behind, she has joined the ranks of the “nones.”

However, she also understands that God is with her, in her work and her relationships, through art, and in communion with nature.

Her testimony is remarkably like that of millions of others across Western societies. Yet these stories are rarely taken as a whole, giving voice to an important cultural critique, meaningful spiritual longing, or serious theological perspective.

Instead, they are often ridiculed, called tedious or boring, most often derided as “radical individualism,” “cafeteria religion,” “navel-gazing spirituality,” “Oprah church,” or in more sophisticated philosophical terms, “moral therapeutic deism.”

Critics say this is happening because people today are “uncommitted, disloyal, or too lazy to get up on whatever Sabbath we celebrate.” They don’t understand community, or they like sports better than church. They are consumers more interested in getting their own needs met than in meeting the needs of the world. They are too busy. They are self-centered, lacking a moral passion for charity or social justice.²

Of course, this may be true for some people. But it is *not* true for most who say they are “*spiritual but not religious*.” And this morning I’d like to explain how our (rather strange) Gospel reading for today—the Transfiguration from Mark—*illuminates* this reality and why this *shift* is perhaps the most important thing we can understand about spiritual *and* religious experience today.

You see, shortly before Jesus began his final journey to Jerusalem, the inner core of the disciples momentarily saw him *transformed*, his form and clothing suffused with light. Jesus “led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus.

The details link Jesus to the world of the Jewish *charismatics*—*the Jewish mystics*. Like Moses before him, he momentarily “glowed” with the radiance of the Spirit (stories of “glowing” holy men are also reported elsewhere). With him were seen Elijah and Moses, the two great charismatic figures of the Jewish tradition.

Of course, it is very difficult to know what to make of the story historically. Did the disciples actually have this experience, or is the whole narrative a symbolic statement of Jesus’ identity? But even if the narrative is viewed as the creation of the church, it remains significant that the tradition associated Jesus with the two great men of Spirit of Israel’s history.³

But regardless of the nature of story, it points to the larger reality that somehow “*God showed up*.”

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded*, Harper One, New York, 2015, pp. 16, 17

² *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 23

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, Harper, New York, 1987, pp. 48, 49

You see, the language of *mysticism* and *spiritual experience* cuts a wide swath through the world's religious traditions, and it presents an alternative theology, that of connection and intimacy.

In Christian tradition, Jesus speaks this language when he claims "*The Father and I are one*" (John 10:30), and when he breathes on his followers and fills them with God's Spirit (20:22); it appears in the testimony of the apostle Paul, who converts during a mystical encounter with Christ on the road; and it fills the effusive poetry of John the Evangelist, whose vision of God is nothing short of one in which the whole of creation is absorbed into love.

So, the biblical narrative is that of a God who comes close, compelled by a burning desire to make heaven *on earth* and to occupy human hearts.

One need not be a mystic to understand this; it need not be the result of years of technical training in some spiritual practice of enlightenment. This has become a prominent contemporary way of speaking about God that reflects a wisdom found in ancient scriptures, a spiritual vocabulary articulated by biblical heroes, saints, reformers, and the humble poor throughout the ages—and even many who consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious, both within and without, the church.

Far too many people who understand God in these ways probably do not know how rich the tradition is that speaks of *God with us, God in the stars and sunrise, God as the face of their neighbors, God in the act of justice, or God as the wonder of love.*

I call this a "horizontal" understanding of God's relationship to us—in the world, with us, intimate, and near. Incarnate. The executive in our earlier story intuitively understood this.

But here's the problem. For centuries—and often still today--conventional Christianity (in both its conservative and liberal forms) has offered the world a mostly "vertical" understanding of God. Think of it this way:

For centuries, religious people confidently asserted that God inhabited heaven, a distant place of eternal reward for the faithful. We occupied a three-tiered universe, with heaven above, where God lived; the world below, where we lived; and the underworld, where we feared we might go after death.

The church *mediated* the space between heaven and earth, acting as a kind of *holy elevator* wherein God sent down divine directions and, if we obeyed the directives, we would go up—eventually—to live in heaven forever and avoid the terrors below.

Stories and sermons taught us that God occupied the high places, looking over the world and caring for it from afar, occasionally interrupting the course of human affairs with some miraculous reminder of divine power. Those same tales emphasized the gap between worldly places and the holy mountains, between the creation and an Almighty Creator. Religious authorities mediated the gap, explaining right doctrine and holy living. If you wanted to live with God forever in heaven, then you listened to them, believed, and obeyed.

But during the last century, the three-tiered universe and its orderly certainty crumbled. The Great War caused its philosophical and political foundations to wobble, and the whole thing collapsed after the even greater war, World War II, when the Nazis and the Holocaust and the bomb shattered history.

Oddly enough, most people did not seem to notice at first or, perhaps were in a state of denial. There were prophets and writers who tried to explain what had happened.

For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor awaiting execution in a Nazi prison, understood that the three-tiered universe with its majestic God had been swept away by the war and that a new "religion-less" Christianity must emerge from history's ashes. Elie Wiesel, a Jewish humanist and survivor of the death camps, who daily experienced the horrors attending the end of the world as it was being incinerated at Auschwitz, summed it all up with a plaintive questioning cry, "*For God's sake, where is God?*"

Some postwar theologians and philosophers understood and began to proclaim the “*death of God*.” Regular people did not take them seriously, however. Soldiers wanted to get home to their sweethearts, back to houses with picket fences in small towns, back to family, church, and business.

The faithful baptized legions of postwar offspring, built bigger and taller temples than ever before, and exercised more influence and political power than Christianity had known since the days of Pope Innocent III—all as a testimony to God’s victory over the forces of evil and the triumph of true religion.

But, alas, it could not last. In the decades that followed, it became increasingly evident that you cannot revive a God for a world that no longer exists.

You see, venerating a God of a vanished world is the very definition of *fundamentalism*, the sort of religion that is inflicting great pain and violence on many millions of people across the planet. Conventional theism—or supernatural theism—is the heart of fundamentalism and depends on the three-tiered universe.

But we now live in a theologically *flattened* (horizontal) world—we have discovered that we are fully capable of creating the terrors of hell right here and no longer need a lake of fire to prove the existence of evil—and we have found that the ranks of saints and angels seem to have thinned and that no deity will be sending miracles to fix the mess we are in.⁴

Which raises the question: *Is there another option between fundamentalism (on the one hand) and a deceased God, (on the other?)*.

I think so—because God continues to “*show up*,” **disbelief** is *not* the primary factor prompting religious defections. Rather *people believe, but they believe differently than they once did*.

In other words, the theological ground is moving; (as several theologians have put it), “*a spiritual revolution is afoot*.” But there is a **gap** between that revolution and the institutions of religious faith.

Whenever a gulf opens between the way people *experience God* and how institutions respond (or fail to respond) to such concerns, historical conditions ripen for spiritual revolution, reformation, and awakening—and we are living in just such a time.

Friends, the spiritual revolution is about two things: *God* and the *world*. It is about God, but it does not wind up being other worldly. It is about the world, but it does not result in secularism. This is a middle-ground revolution, in which millions of people are navigating the space between conventional theism and a secularized world.

We need to understand that there is a pattern of God all around us—a deeply spiritual theology—lived out by Jesus—that relates to contemporary concerns, provides meaning and hope for the future, and possesses surprisingly rich ties to wisdom from the past.⁵

I’ll continue this discussion with you again next week—as we dig deeper into the meaning of this *horizontal, near, intimate mystical way of experiencing God*, and I’ll share *practical ways that we can begin to narrow the gap between the religious who are spiritual—and the spiritual who are not religious*. Amen.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 4, 5, 6

⁵ Ibid., pp. 25, 26

