

Vision: Being Moved By God

II Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9 February 3, 2008

Frederick Buechner is one of my favorite preachers. He can really spin a story. He tells of a time in his life when God broke through to him in a rather unusual way. He wrote: "I remember sitting parked by the roadside once, terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter's illness and what was going on in our family." He wrote about sitting there thinking about his daughter's illness when he noticed a car approaching him seeming from out of nowhere. He said that the message from God he needed then appeared to him on the license plate of that car. The license plate "bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I needed most to see exactly then," he wrote. "The word was TRUST."

He wonders in the midst of the story about how one describes such an experience? "Was the experience something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while?" Or, was it the word of God? "I am willing to believe," Buechner wrote, "that maybe it was something of both, but for me it was an epiphany."

He later learned that the owner of the car was a "trust" officer at a local bank. As Buechner is prone to do, he told the story often and during one of those tellings the trust officer realized that it was his license plate Buechner was referencing. And so, he paid Fred a visit and he presented him with the license plate. Buechner placed it on his bookshelf as a constant reminder of his need to trust God. "It is rusty around the edges and a little battered," he writes, "and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen."¹

We call such eye-awakening experiences – such God-moments – such "Aha" moments – *epiphanies*. We believe such events are significant. We set aside a whole season for remembering them – the occasions recorded in scripture when God became visible in someone's heart and life. We appropriately call the season Epiphany. This year's epiphany season is almost over. Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent.

During this season of Epiphany we also consider what the times of new awareness – the God-moments – have been or might look like in our own lives. The season begins thirteen days after Christmas. The lesson we consider on that day is the one about the wise men visiting the Bethlehem manger. We recall the story of their being led there by a star – an epiphany – or something from outside themselves.

The second lesson on which we focus our attention during the season of Epiphany is the story of Jesus' baptism. We recall the story of how the Spirit descended upon Jesus pictured as a dove in the story. We recall the account of a voice from heaven saying "You are my Son, in whom I am well pleased." It's a story of an epiphany.

The best story, however, is saved for the last Sunday of the season. It's the story of the Transfiguration – that day when Jesus and a couple of his buddies went up a mountain and something happened so profound to Jesus – in Jesus – that it affected even how he looked. Epiphanies can do that to a person. Visions can do that to people. They can do it to a church as well.

I've shared with you before the story of the time I led a mission trip to Gary, West Virginia and the paper my daughter, Megan, wrote for a high school English class about the experience. She still references it as one of those experiences that transformed her life – that gave her an insight to God's moving in her life and the world. It was for her, and for many others on the trip, an epiphany.

She titled her paper, “Touched By the Hearts of Gary, West Virginia.” Again, I’m not going to share the whole piece with you, only enough for you to sense what the experience meant to her. But, if you are interested in reading the whole story, I will again add it to the end of the sermon on the web-site.

The story Megan told in her paper is about one of those serendipity-type of things that sometimes happens. It’s the kind of thing that we can never really program into life or events or trips. It’s just one of those things that happens and results in experiences beyond our wildest dreams or expectations.

It all began when a group of sophomore guys decided that it would be great fun to throw a football around – inside the house in which we were staying. Within seconds there was the sound of crashing glass. They had shattered one of the shower doors of the two showers. Now, you have to understand that there were fifty teenagers and fifteen adults staying in that house who were supposed to share those two – after the errant football went through one of them, one shower.

Well, word got out in the community about our situation and by the evening meal a dozen Gary residents had offered the showers in their homes for our use. While we were at first relieved, as the time approached after our day of work the next day for our shower time, talk turned to how awkward it felt to be going into the homes of strangers to take a shower.

It turned out to be one of the most meaningful aspects of the whole trip. Over and over again during the evening time of reflection teenagers and adults shared about what happened in the homes of these people and what it was doing to them. Conversations between the residents of Gary and high school teenagers from Worthington produced a much more profound experience than anything we could have ever scripted. They talked about family and life and school and goals and coal mining and life in a community abandoned by a large corporation. Sometimes who was helping and who was helped got a little blurry. It was a transforming experience for all of us.

Would anyone here be surprised if I told you that the conversation near the end of the week often involved comments about not wanting to leave – about treasuring the experience so much that there was a reluctance to leave a place where something special happened – about wanting to mark the place in some way. Those of you who have had life-changing experiences on a retreat or a mission trip or a vacation or concert know about what we were going through. While it’s often hard for us to schedule in those times with God, when it happens we don’t want to go back to the real world – back to our daily living.

Well, we’re in pretty good company when we have feelings like that – when we have experiences like that happen in our lives. That’s really what was going on with Peter when he suggested that he make a couple of dwellings for Jesus and Moses and Elijah up on that mountain that day. He wanted to capture the moment for all eternity. He wanted to mark the place – to build a monument to the experience. He didn’t want to leave the place. He wanted to live there.

But Jesus led them back down the mountain instructing them not to share their story until a later time. “Put it in your heads, boys, but don’t talk about it just yet. Give it some time.”

Life is about getting our heads in the clouds and then getting them back out in such a way that we do some earthly good as a result of having had the experience – it’s about spending time with God, being transformed by God and then living in the real world a transformed life.

That night the community leaders said to the Micah² Committee: “Who are you? The community doesn’t know who you are. You occupy this absolutely fantastic, extremely visible corner of High and Henderson and do so much good and are so alive, but no one knows it. You need to use this corner and you need to tell your story.” That night, was an epiphany of sorts for those of us who sat in the parlor. It was a strange feeling to be criticized, critiqued and not feel hurt, but rather infused with a new vision of what we needed to do. Oh, it wasn’t a complete vision. We didn’t have all the words to explain it. We weren’t sure of all we were going to have to do (still aren’t), but we knew that we were going to be different as a result of what we heard that night.

Vision results when we are moved by God - and vision enables us to be moved by God. We’re in for some transforming experiences – we’re in for some more epiphanal moments. We need simply to put ourselves in the presence of God and be ready for what God will do with us.

Yep, Ash Wednesday happens this week. Today is a good day to begin thinking about how it is we’re going to spend time with God in the coming weeks if you haven’t already done so. Lent begins this week. Tomorrow we’re going to start creating a display in the parlor with ideas of some spiritual disciplines you might want to consider making a part of your Lenten journey.

I just have to share one more story with you this morning about a recent epiphanal moment for me. I’m going to say more about it at the Ash Wednesday service, so this is just sort of a sneak preview. Several weeks ago now, a couple of friends of mine were sitting around discussing a challenge one of the leading evangelical social activists of our day put to them after they questioned an idea of his for an upcoming rally. Among the group were George Howard, Director of the West Ohio Conference Connectional Ministries, Rev. John Edgar, the pastor of the Church For All People, Rev. Laurie Clark, you already know who that is, and Dee Stickley-Miner, one of the Conference’s Associate Directors for Connectional Ministries. Anyway, they ended up talking about how to make real change in our attitudes toward hunger, food consumption, nutritional food, God’s world, etc. Oh, there’s so much more to the story and I don’t have time to share it all with you this morning. If it intrigues you, I invite you again to consider the Tuesday evening “Extending the Table” series beginning February 12.

Anyway, one of the ideas they came up with was the idea of putting a jar in the middle of the dining room or kitchen table and dropping in it 10%, 5% or 3% of whatever it cost you for food in a given week. For example, after you eat at a restaurant, when you return home you will drop into the jar 10%, or whatever amount you determine will be the amount to help raise your awareness, you place in the jar 10% of whatever your meal cost you. When you return home from shopping at the grocery store, you put in the jar 10% of the amount you spent on your groceries.

For some reason, the idea struck a responsive cord in me. It’s sort of like what happened to me the day I heard about picking up bread from Panera’s on Tuesday nights two years ago. As a result, I’m going to give it a try this Lent and I am inviting anyone who wants to try it to add this to their experience during Lent. Now instead of using a jar, we’re going to use these bags. During the singing of the closing hymn each Sunday during Lent, there will be the opportunity for those of you who participate to place in some container in the front of the church your gifts. Now, if you want to hear more about the idea and what is going to be done with the funds, etc. I again invite you to attend one of the Ash Wednesday services and the Tuesday evening class.

Epiphanies - visions - move us to act – they make a difference in our lives.

As United Methodists we believe communion to be a means of grace – it is an act of receiving, experiencing, the grace of God – it is an epiphany of sorts. It is freely given – it connects us to God – it puts us in God’s presence so that God may offer us forgiveness and heal us of guilt’s stranglehold on our lives. All are invited to this meal. If you wish to receive the grace of God in your life, you are invited to receive this meal and have an epiphany – an encounter with the one who provides vision – who changes us – heals us – makes us whole. Let us share in this holy meal.

1. Frederick Buechner, Telling Secrets (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1991), pp. 49-50.

Touched By the Hearts of Gary, West Virginia

“Did you guys hear that?” I asked the nine other girls that would be rooming with me for the next five days.

“Hear what?” my friend Marika inquired.

“That shattering noise. It sounded like it came from upst...” The sound of six sophomore guys plodding down the stairs yelling at each other interrupted my train of thought.

“It’s your fault, Reilly. You could’ve caught it,” Mike yelled.

“Mike, there was no chance in hell he could’ve caught that awful pass,” Dave yelled back, defending his friend.

This sounded like one of those times when I should’ve kept my mouth shut, but I didn’t. “What happened?” I asked.

“We, ummm, I mean . . . , the shower door kind of broke,” Reilly mumbled quickly.

I couldn’t believe it! We’d been there less than ten minutes, and they had already broken a shower!

We were on a work camp in Gary, West Virginia. Gary is in southwestern West Virginia and is a small, one-store, old mining town. It is poverty stricken due to the closing of the coal mines. As we drove into town, we questioned why they needed us to come in and fix up their houses when they could afford nicer cars than most of our families.

Upon our arrival we discovered we were going to be staying in a very large three-story house. Despite the size of the house, we knew it was going to be a challenge for the thirty-four youth and eight adults who had made the trip. We soon discovered we did not have the house to ourselves, however. Another church youth group from Cutler, Florida warmly welcomed us to our shared living quarters. This meant there were fifty teenagers and fifteen adults who had the challenge of eating, sleeping, and yes, showering together. Only two showers would have been hard enough, but we knew it was going to be impossible with only the one shower after the boys’ little football accident.

Soon, word got around the neighborhood that we were in need of showers. Within a few hours more than a dozen families offered to let a few of us take showers in each of their homes. We were amazed and touched that so many people would open their homes to teenagers whom they had never met before.

One of our counselors, Lauri, my friend, Jeni, and I were assigned to an elderly couple who lived on Lovers Lane. When we finished working the next day, Jeni and I walked the few blocks to the couple's small home. On our way to their home, we discussed how awkward we felt going into the house of strangers to shower. We also doubted whether we would have anything in common with them.

Our worries were soon relieved when they welcomed us into their home with open arms. They introduced themselves as the Mitchells. We soon discovered they were a friendly, elderly couple loved by all the children in the neighborhood.

While Jeni was in the shower, I sat and talked with them in their living room. Although we weren't helping them directly, they thanked us countless times for what we, complete strangers, were trying to do to help their community. We had already discovered the homes and cars we first saw were not representative of the really deep level of poverty around Gary.

We went to the Mitchell's every one of the five days we were in Gary. Each day they offered us food and beverages and we never left with less than a Three Musketeers candy bar, two suckers, and a feeling of happiness.

This feeling of happiness came from the interesting conversations we had with the Mitchells. We talked about our families, goals, education and life in general. We also talked about the past of their town, Gary. They said that they had retired a few years before the mines shut down so that their lives didn't suffer much from the closings, but it tore them apart to see their friends' and neighbors' lives destroyed. The Mitchells mentioned that a family's only source of identity became a car. While the American dream for many people has been to own land, the people of Gary just wanted to own a nice car.

I went on this work camp to help other people, but I feel that my encounters with the Mitchells helped me at least as much as I helped their community. I learned how decisions by large corporations affect real people, witnessed what it means to be a community of people who truly care for one another, and not to judge people by first impressions. However, the most important lesson I learned is that it is possible to build friendships despite differences in age, financial status, or cultural upbringing. I will use these lessons as examples for building my relationships in the future.

All all this because of one broken shower.”