

Title: Does That Resonate With You?

Text: I Thessalonians 2: 9 – 13

Date: November 5, 2017

So what were you doing last night at 2:30 AM? I had gone to bed at a reasonable time, but at 2:30 AM I was awake in one of those times that is referred to in the Old Testament as “the watches of the night.” Of course I didn’t want to get up, so I lay there in the dark trying to get back to sleep. But as I was trying to get back to sleep, all these thoughts started coming to me, and I found myself writing a sermon in my mind. I had all these images about dying, and the title of the sermon was “How to Die.” It felt like something of a rush, like if I could explain this properly, people would no longer fear death, and the process of dying would be seen as a great adventure. I thought that this would be a great sermon to deliver on All Saints Day . . . but I already had something prepared for today. So I thought, “OK then. I am prepared for next year.”

So what were you doing last night at 3:00 AM? I was still awake for one of those “watches of the night,” and another sermon was starting to come to me. It would be titled “The Ghosts of Shepherdstown.” I had images of being influenced by our spiritual ancestors. This wasn’t a scary dream. Time was not the way we normally think of it. I thought that this would be a great sermon to preach on All Saints Day . . . but I already have something prepared for today. So I thought, “OK then. I am prepared for next year.”

So comforted to know that next year is under control, let’s get to the task at hand today. This will be the last of our three weeks inspired by Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians. So what were some of the highlights we touched on?

We concluded that something real clearly must have happened there that changed people's lives in Thessalonica. I suggested that you could trace the roots of this transformation back to a powerful mystical experience that Paul had. I invoked the name of Marcus Borg who said, **"Paul had what scholars would call a mystical experience – a powerful and dramatic experience of the sacred."** We talked about what modern religious studies scholars would outline as characteristics of a full-blown mystical experience.

So this brings us to some practical questions we can't avoid. Does this really happen in modern times? What does this have to do with those of us who don't think of ourselves as mystics?

Any of you ever been to Louisville, Kentucky? Most people wouldn't think of it as any kind of spiritual mecca, yet Thomas Merton speaks of an experience he had there in 1958 in the middle of running some errands. He writes: **"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."**

Of course Merton went on to write many books, and millions of people have had their lives changed subtly – and not so subtly -

by being awakened to see Life in a new way. But how does the average person relate to such experiences?

Theologian E. Hornbeck writes that, **“mysticism in the strict sense, and everyday mysticism [is] one of degree and not kind. The classic mystic, then, is not some freak of nature or human exception, but rather one who points the way, who can show us the potential that exists in each and every human life, and the depth and Spirit that lie waiting to be discovered in every human experience.”**

Beyond reading good books, I also believe that something subtle and significant happens when we gather in this meeting house each week. Beyond the words that are shared from the pulpit, I believe there is a sense in which we are enriched by the intentions and vibrations of those we gather with. Something within us is awakened by those we rub shoulders with. Stanley Hauerwas writes: **“Saints cannot exist without a community, as they require, like all of us, nurturance by a people who, while often unfaithful, preserve the habits necessary to learn the story of God.”** (from “The Gesture of a Truthful Story” in *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas’ Theology of Disability*) Nadia Bolz-Weber adds a contrarian twist to this when she says, **“I think God is wanting to be known. And my experience of God wanting to be known is much more in the person who is annoying me at the moment rather than in the sunset.”**

While we might think of this as spiritual secrets of the church, many outside the church have discovered similar truths. Recently I listened to the audio book version of **“Big Magic”** by Elizabeth Gilbert. Some of you might know her as the author of “Eat Pray Love,” and other novels. This book, however, is non-fiction, and explores the creative process, particularly for authors. I am not saying it is a “must read,” but I was struck by the degree to which she described the creative process in very spiritual terms. She would describe the mystery of the process, and how at times she

felt like she was tapping into a gift from the universe. She would very much understand the rush of ideas I sometimes have in my half-dream states in the middle of the night.

I am guessing not many of you know the name Steve Earle, a singer-songwriter in the folk or country rock category. He is a hard living guy, and most certainly not from the Christian goody two-shoes camp. Even so, he wrote a beautiful song entitled "God is God" that I find extremely profound, and expresses some of what I am trying to get at this morning. The first stanza goes:

I believe in prophecy.
Some folks see things not everybody can see.
And, once in a while, they pass the secret along to you and me.
And I believe in miracles.
Something sacred burning in every bush and tree.
We can all learn to sing the songs the angels sing.
Yeah, I believe in God, and God ain't me.

It is a wonderful song, and if you have trouble with his low, rough voice, you can't help but love the version of this song that Joan Baez did. The point is that even non-religious people are sensing these same truths.

Some of these themes were echoed in Paul's words this morning. Like Merton, he speaks of a profound and tender love he has for these people. And we can see how these vibrations were then passed on to others. He describes how they accepted the Word **"not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers."** (I Thess. 2:13) It clearly resonated with them.

I pray that some of this resonates with you. Few of us may be "book material mystics," but I firmly believe there is an invitation for more of us to be "every day mystics." I pray as we rub shoulders with each other in this meeting house that somehow we will share in a vision that there is **"something sacred burning**

in every bush and tree.” I pray that, like Merton, we might have more moments of feeling **“suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that”** you love all these people. I pray that we may have more moments when it feels like we are **“waking from a dream of separateness,”** and discovering a sense of unity that transcends a “GI Generation” sense of “we’re all in this together.” Such flashes of insight can come on a mountain trail, or in the middle of the night, but if we are doing this faith community thing right we should be more prone to these transformational insights when we are traveling the road together.

And you won’t want to miss next year’s All Saints Sunday!

Amen.

I Thessalonians 2: 9 – 13

⁹You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. ¹¹As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, ¹²urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

¹³We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.