

**NO THING AND ALL THINGS**  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church  
Exodus 33:11-23

Our reading for today comes (again) from the Old Testament book of Exodus, as we continue with this dramatic recounting of the story of Moses and the Hebrew people making their way out of Egypt, away from slavery toward the promised land. From Exodus 33 beginning at 11.

*The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you... Consider too that these are your people." The LORD said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Moses said, "Show me your glory (the fullness of Your Being!), I pray." The Lord said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."*

For the word of Love in scripture, for the word of Love among us, for the word of within us... (*thanks be to God*)

This fall on Sunday mornings we've been enjoying some very lively encounters with "mystics, mysticism and contemporary faith." Though this may seem odd, our series on evolution and spirituality last semester actually pointed us in this precise direction, ending with the provocative claim that "the faithful of the future will be mystics or nothing at all."

Many of us regard this with skepticism. Some have already voiced a preference for the "nothing at all" part, if the alternative is the way of the mystic. Which I think is pretty great, since Nothing (or No Thing) just happens to be a favorite name for God, at least among the mystics.

I know talk about mystics conjures up all sorts of weirdness—voices, visions, visitations--that offends us good Adult Children of the Enlightenment. We are hardwired to our skepticism, and attached to the belief that reason and logic are the highest human capacities. We trust in science to be our one true savior (despite all the evidence to the contrary, from Hiroshima and Auschwitz to the ruined mountaintops of West Virginia.)

It should be fairly clear to us by now that science and reason, while essential, are also insufficient in our pursuit of life abundant. For that, we need wisdom, deep wisdom, and a relationship with the wisdom way of knowing. Which is nothing other than the "still more excellent way of Love," the great insight of French mystic Therese of Lisieux, as she prayed with that great Jewish mystic, the apostle Paul, who was, of course was

empowered by his relationship with the great Jewish mystic Jesus of Nazareth.

Richard Rohr in his terrific book, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystic Sees*, says that the word mystic simply “refers to one who has moved from... belief systems or belonging systems to actual inner experience...” Theologian Matthew Fox insists, “everyone is born a mystic and a lover who experiences the unity of things.” And the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, claims that “a mystic is anyone who has the gnawing suspicion that the apparent discord, brokenness, contradictions, and discontinuities that assault us every day might conceal a hidden unity.”

Look around; has the world ever been more in need of that vision of unity--all people, all creatures, the whole cosmos, created by love, for love, bound together in love? This is the vision of the great mystics, our teachers and companions on the more excellent way of love, showing us what is possible in all human being.

We may be hardwired to skepticism, and probably also a capacity for cruelty, but we are *also* hardwired for relationship with the Holy, and the life of compassion that this inspires. “Experience of the Spirit begins at the very heart of (human) existence,” according to theologian Karl Rahner, whose whole theology of ordinary mysticism was forged in the unimaginable devastation of Nazi Germany. Rahner insisted that our experience of God is so constant that it often escapes our conscious perception. Encounters with Incomprehensible Mystery (his favorite name for God) are most perceptible in experiences of deep darkness and unknowing, in restlessness and longing, resistance to suffering and injustice, as well as joy. Our primary work is consent; deep listening, reflecting, noticing what is always already there, and learning to respond in love.

This way of love and transformative encounter with the living Presence is embodied in the lives of the mystics throughout history (and in every tradition); and it is first fully articulated in our tradition, right here in the story of our boy Moses. Or so commentators have claimed from the very beginning. The earliest Christian theologians (we’re talking 2,3,4 centuries) understood perfectly well that the stories of scripture were wisdom stories; they assumed historical roots of one sort or another, but found far greater significance in metaphorical meaning and deep spiritual significance. They remind us to read these stories not to accumulate information, but to invite transformation.

So, the story of Moses, is not just a recounting of how people got from over there to over here; it is a description of the universal human journey out of bondage toward abundant life. From a center in self to a center in Love; we *are* loved by an unending love and we are called *to be love* in response.

Moses’ journey begins in protest; troubled by the exploitation of the Hebrew people in Egypt, he kills a man for mistreating a Hebrew slave. Terrified, Moses flees into the desert. And right there, in the wilderness (at the so called burning bush) he has this transformative encounter with mysterious loving Presence. *Yahweh*; breath, wind, Spirit, provokes, inspires, empowers a very reluctant (and unself confident) Moses to lead his

people out from slavery and into the wilderness, where, we learn, liberation is still a long way off.

This mysterious, empowering Presence is always experienced by Moses most clearly in cloud and darkness; in unknowing encounter with loving obscurity. Many thousands of years later, the Spanish mystic John of the Cross will call this *la Noche Oscura*—the obscure night, which we have translated “dark”, and confused with depression. John insisted repeatedly: the night is more lovely than the dawn. His favorite name for the Holy One is: *Nada y Todo*—Nothing, which is to say, No thing *and* All Things.

It is this lovely night that Moses experiences in today’s story. He is baffled and confused and keeps asking for clarity—where are we going? who’s going with us? Give me answers! And let me see your face!!—and all he gets in return is Presence and assurance: I am with you; I will go with you; I will show you the way of goodness and mercy. (I will; *Yahweh*)

William Johnston, contemporary historian of Christian mysticism, points out that central to the mystical life as illustrated in Moses, is not just encounter and experience, it is living, dynamic relationship. The threads of intimacy and deepening trust run throughout these stories; the prayer of Moses is not just worship and adoration; he complains, argues, intercedes, requests and pours out his frustration to the Holy One. And then, he listens in the darkness for the word of Love.

Which I think is actually a pretty great description of prayer—listening in darkness for the word of Love. Its ultimately, how we all experience deepening relationship with the Holy, whether we consciously claim it, or not. One of history’s greatest teachers of prayer was John of the Cross’ spiritual mother Teresa of Avila, whose feast day was this very week (October 15). Teresa wrote volumes on the subject of prayer. But she also said, it boils down to this: “prayer is nothing else than an intimate friendship, a frequent heart to heart conversation with (the One) whom we know loves us.” Teresa – who will show up in our seminar in a couple of weeks--was one of Christianity’s most outrageous characters, successful reformers and powerful prophetic voices. She was also hunted by the Inquisition her whole life long. And through it all, she experienced an ever deepening intimacy with the Holy. On the road often in pursuit of her vision, she faces nearly constant danger, discomfort, and pain. On one especially disastrous trip, after her donkey cart shatters in the pouring rain and she finds herself mired in mud, she hears the Voice assure her “this is how I love my friends” to which she snaps back: “well no wonder you have so few of them.”

Our spiritual lives, prayer lives, relationship with Holy Mystery--is not about putting on our Sunday best, and pretending to be anything other than what we are. It is about accepting and bringing our whole broken, muddy selves, every last unattractive bit, and every aspect of our daily experience – the joy and confusion and despair -- into the Loving Presence. And noticing. Allowing our prayer to evolve from: what is happening and why? To a deeper grounding in trust and hope that can ask: what is it that You, Loving Mystery, are doing, what are you inviting, in my life, in our lives, here and now?

It is a practice, and a journey of discovery, out of bondage into the wilderness and encounter with Unending Love that draws us toward liberation. This is, it turns out, a well travelled path, one that is inherently communal. We journey, with God, together, and if we choose, with the companionship of all those who have gone before us: from Moses to Paul; from Jesus and Mary to Teresa and John; from Rumi to Ghandi to King.

As all these companions make clear, this is not a journey toward comfort or clarity—it is only about love. Does this practice, person, experience—draw me toward or away from love. Does it diminish or enhance my capacity for compassion—receiving it as much as offering. Teresa summed it all up this: “The important thing is not to think much but to love much; and so do that which best stirs you to love.”

Breathe in: Unending Love, for yourself  
Breathe out: Unending Love, for the world

May this be so.