

Finding Faith: How is God Experienced...Really
Mark 11:1-11
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St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
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Today is the fourth part of a four-part sermon series called Finding Faith, based on the book by the same title by Brian McLaren. If you missed any of the previous messages I encourage you to go to our web site where you can listen or read them. The first one was about good and bad faith. The second was about how faith grows and the four stages. Last Sunday was about the too-small images of God and why God is a personal and relational God.

Today we talk about different ways we experience God. If you were asked how it is that you usually experience God-moments would you know what to say? By the end of this 15-minute sermon I would hope that you would know.

A Gallup Poll reported that eighty-five percent of the people interviewed said that they had had a “mystical” experience with God. Your God-moments may have been filled with all the glory of a mountain top vision. They may have been the joy and excitement of being with a crowd who are praising Jesus much like his Jerusalem entry on a donkey. More likely than not, your “mystical” experiences of God happen while you’re driving to work, or watching your child sleep, or saying goodbye to a loved one. It doesn’t matter where they happen. It does matter that we discover our own way of experiencing this wonderful God who loves and graces our lives each moment of every day. It does matter that we accept our unique way of knowing God.

Brian McLaren talks about five ways people experience God. I invite you to see which ones sync with your experience of God.

First is RITUAL. The story is told about the baptism of King Aengus by St. Patrick in the middle of the fifth century. Sometime during the rite, St. Patrick leaned on his sharp-pointed staff and inadvertently stabbed the king’s foot. After the baptism was over, St. Patrick looked down at all the blood, realized what he had done and begged the king’s forgiveness. “Why did you suffer this pain in silence?” the saint wanted to know. The king replied, “I thought it was part of the ritual.”

Clearly, rituals can have little or no meaning. But for many people religious rituals provide a foundation upon which they can build their relationship with God. People who come to St. John from other faith traditions often comment that there is something in our worship rituals that helps them connect with their past experience of God, something in our communion or baptism rituals, something in our hymnody, our liturgical colors and vestments.

In my work with teenagers over the years I have been fascinated by the fact that they always complained about the boring rituals of adult worship. And yet I remember gathering the group to take a picture on the last day of camp on the big green bus. At camp the next year the kids said, “And remember our tradition of the picture on the bus!” The point is that rituals are important if they are your rituals. They are important if you find meaning in them.

The second way people experience God is through NATURE. Not much needs to be said on this subject. We live in Alaska, right? We are surrounded by so much natural beauty that it can overwhelm our soul. There is a spiritual peace that comes on a mountain hike when we sit on a rock and gaze at the vista below. There is a deep awareness of God when we glide through calm waters on a kayak. There is a soulful prayer that rises to the heavens when we sit around a campfire feeling its warmth.

For McLaren the third way to experience God is through OBEDIENCE OR SELF-DENIAL. He writes, “God is often found through our doing things we don’t want to do, or not doing things we want to do.”¹ I have experienced God many times this way. I didn’t want to be a teacher when I was in college. But I finally listened and went from poor grades to straight A’s. I didn’t want to be a pastor but after five years of teaching I wanted to teach the power behind the science. I have to say that I really didn’t want to be a superintendent. But our bishop thinks otherwise and when I was ordained I promised to go where I was sent. I felt a kindred spirit with Isaiah who said to God, “Here am I. Send me.”

We all make choices in life. All too often we make the wrong choices. Many people realize that when they make the right choice, including admitting our past wrong choices, that a new experience of God begins. McLaren writes, “There is a kind of courage involved—to do the right thing even though our lust, our fear, our pride, our greed, or our laziness is crying out against it.”²

Do you know that good feeling when you ask for and receive forgiveness from someone you have wronged? Or that light and joy when you help someone in need or make that generous pledge? For many this is how they experience God. Denying ourselves some pleasure for the sake of helping others can truly be a God-moment.

The fourth way people experience God is through WORSHIP AND ART. Of course it is possible to experience God through your own private worship. But there is something special about worshipping with others as a community of faith. Think about your experience of worship in the church. Have you ever felt a closeness with God during a hymn? How about the sharing of joys and concerns or a prayer? Maybe a crescendo during a moving bell or vocal choir anthem? Perhaps during a sermon when you felt the Spirit nudging your heart? Or maybe during a baptism and a parent’s tears of joy? Perhaps you experienced God in communion during the liturgy or when you received the bread and cup?

McLaren writes, “The house of worship you attend may use Mozart and Bach on pipe organ, hymns on a piano, contemporary music with electric guitars and drums, or the instruments and music of some other culture. The architecture may be gothic, Victorian, or Shaker—thatched roof or baobab tree—living room or school cafeteria. The liturgy may be ancient and formal or spontaneous and informal. But in just about every religious community, the experience of worship is intended at least to be an experience of beauty and glory. In that experience, you often can experience God.”³

This leads us to the fifth way to experience God: COMMUNITY. McLaren writes, “Those who seek God generally agree that God is often found in other people, and

¹ Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 168.

² Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 169.

³ Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 170.

more specifically, in the experience of loving and being loved by other people.”⁴ How is it that you know that God loves you? Yes, the Bible tells us so. But it is through community that God loves us through other people. I know that God loves me because Kim Beckett shows me God-love all the time...well at least most of the time! I know that God loves me because my staff forgive my sins and mistakes. I know that God loves me because three year old Mia Grace Stratton runs to give me a hug every time she comes to church. How do you know God loves you? My guess is that your answer will involve naming other people in your life. And some of them will be St. John people.

Let's turn to nature for an illustration. A seagull exults in freedom. When flying alone, he thrusts his wings back with powerful strokes, climbs higher and higher, and then swoops down in majestic loops and circles. In a flock, though, the seagull is a different bird. His majesty dissolves into fights and cruelty. Concepts of sharing and manners do not seem to exist among gulls. They are so fiercely jealous and competitive that if you tie a ribbon around the leg of a gull, making him stand out from the rest, you sentence him to death. The others in his flock will attack and kill him.

On the other hand, consider the wild goose. The V-formation they use in flying enables them to fly with more ease and speed. The point position is the most difficult because of wind resistance, so the geese rotate this position every few minutes. The easiest flight is experienced in the two rear sections of the formation, and the stronger geese permit the young, weak, and older birds to occupy these positions. Biologists believe that the constant honking encourages the weaker geese.

The seagull teaches us to break loose and fly alone, but the wild goose teaches us to fly in a family, a community. So being together is really important as a church. Coming to worship even when you'd rather stay home and watch a big game is an important part of encouraging others. Even when you go camping for the weekend and have experienced God in nature you can come to the 6:30 service and be there for the sake of the community.

You have a place in the V-formation. Sometimes we need you to fly up front and take the brunt of the headwinds. Sometimes you are feeling weak and need to be supported at the end. The point is that we need everyone to fly together as a community. Our experience of God will be much richer for it.

Ritual, obedience, nature, worship, and community. There are more ways we experience God. McLaren writes another chapter with seven more ways. But we'll stop here.

What have we learned so far with this series? That rejecting faith can mean that we are rejecting bad faith. That doubt and questions help us grow to a new stage of faith. That many images of God are inadequate to express the fullness of God's personality and glory. And we learn that people experience God in different ways. Some need to feel something while others need to do something. Some need to know and others need mystery in order to experience God. It is important that each of us know what works for us. It is important that we not be passive, but that we engage in meaningful rituals, acts of obedience, time in nature, worship with each other, and vital community so that we can experience the breadth and depth of who God is in this world.

⁴ Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 173.