

April, 2015

Reflections - My Experience of God

Once upon a time I had special experiences of God. I saw God in those times when something wonderful would happen. And because they happened so wonderfully, I just *knew* that God was there with me.

I remember the day I became a Christian. I was a lonely junior-high student. I had just read the book *The Cross and the Switchblade* and was fascinated by the stories the author David Wilkerson told of spectacular Christian transformations. I read that book on a Saturday. The next day I went to my youthgroup meeting at church and heard from a "Jesus Person" that if I did not have a friend in the world, Jesus would be my friend. That was all I needed. At the end of the meeting I asked Jesus to be my friend. And to my surprise, I felt something right then and there! My hands tingled a little bit, almost as if a voltage were being passed through my arms. The next day I walked home from school talking with my new friend, feeling very close to God..

I remember the moment Cheri and I got informally engaged. It was early summer, just after our Junior year of college. We were eating breakfast together, reminiscing a bit about the seven years we had know each other since we met that first day of high school. We had become good friends, though we almost never dated. Somehow during that breakfast we found ourselves plotting about how we could live in a school bus and travel around the country. And then it happened. We both realized at the same time that we were talking about -- *marriage*. The language I use now to describe it is that the Holy Spirit fell on us at that moment. We both simply knew--without a shadow of doubt--that we were to be married.

There have been other special experiences in my Christian life: the time I was so touched in prayer that I could not stop crying, the time God spoke into my heart and told me that he wanted to hear my rambling thoughts about philosophy, the dream that helped guide me into my current ministry. I

will always be grateful for my special experiences of God.

Over time, however, those experiences seemed to come less frequently, less powerfully. In fact, I began to wonder where God was. I confessed my sins. I tried harder. No results, at least the results I was looking for. Yet over time I began to notice--and then to look--where I hadn't perceived anything before. I would be working with a hand plane smoothing out a board, stroke by stroke, and I would realize that I was not alone. No special experience. No, none at all. In fact it was quite the opposite. It was more like God was just *with* me in the very ordinariness of this very ordinary task. One year a canyon wren made its home for a few months in the place where I go to pray in the mornings. Every morning it would quietly laugh at me during prayer: "Ha ha ha ha ha". The simple song of a local bird, in its very naturalness, was the voice of God sharing my prayers.

There have been other ordinary experiences in my Christian life: repairing the fencing on the ranch every spring, looking out of airplane windows at the scenery, sharing the joys and sorrows of other people in friendship or in spiritual direction, listening to good music, receiving bread and wine every Eucharist. I will always be grateful for my ordinary experiences of God.

As time has passed further I have begun to notice still another kind of "experience of God": experience for the sake of others. Perhaps I can explain this best by describing what happened to me last Friday. It was Good Friday, and I was running the sound board during our "stations of the cross" time and Good Friday service. Part-way through the stations of the cross I had a thought, and this thought then led me to think of my outline for the upcoming Fuller course on Worship and Prayer. Well, what happened then was that I got distracted from my own participation in the service. I was distracted because my mind was simply flooded with ideas regarding that course. Now mind you, I did not "feel the love of God," in the depths of my soul. I experienced no tingles. There was no natural joy in the beauties of the ordinary gifts of this worship service. In fact I was a bit stressed trying to run sound and

keep up with what was going on in my mind at the same time. But during the space of about twenty or thirty minutes, I "received" a complete eleven-week outline of themes and practices for my upcoming class. I picked up a scrap piece of paper and just kept writing and writing -- two pages of notes during the stations of the cross and then a little bit more during the Good Friday service.

By the end of that mind-flood, I realized that I had "experienced" God. But it had so little to do with me. No sense of divine intimacy, no mystical or charismatic union. Just a bunch of neat ideas pouring into my mind in the middle of some other activity. Perhaps this is what the gifts of the Spirit are about. The Holy Spirit does something--either using my natural abilities or doing something that is not so natural--for the sake of the building up of the Body of Christ. I am a teacher with some odd combination of natural abilities and spiritual gift. And in that moment the Spirit used my abilities/gifts to inspire an outline that I think will be useful in the training of young worship leaders. I tell you this one story simply because it is a good example of something I have experienced many times in my life. Sometimes I call it a "divine download." I am sure that something like this is what went on for those carpenters like Oholiab and Bezalel who were anointed by the Spirit for the construction of the tent of meeting (see Exodus 31). I can just imagine Bezalel waking up in the middle of the night with a great idea for how to transfer a delicate pattern into metal work. I think that Paul's description of gifts in Romans 12 also reminds me of the same kind of thing. Experience of God for the sake of others.

But honestly, as I look back at all my experience of God--special, ordinary, whether for myself or for others--I have begun to wonder of late if I don't "see God" now more in the whole than in any part. It's not my *experiences* of God (whether special or ordinary), but my *experience* of God over a lifetime that seems to be most important these days.

Let me give you an example of what I am talking about. When Cheri and I first got married, I had this twenty-something expectation of what "love" might be like. And frankly, it had a lot to do with "making love": brief and powerful special experiences. Over time, however, I learned to find love in

the very ordinary things of life together. We share food. We share stories. We share life itself-- sometimes very pleasant and sometimes not so pleasant. And then I find times when I discover how to love her better and I find love in paying attention to her tone of voice, in anticipating her moods in view of what the week has been like. Now, after nearly forty years of marriage, I see our love more and more in the shared experience of the whole. Whatever we do now seems to carry with it all of the life we have shared together. It is a richer kind of love than what I expected back when I was twenty-something. And it is broader than simply finding love in the ordinary things of life or in loving service.

We have had an adult Sunday School class in our church on "Experience of God" lately. People have told their stories and it has been a rich sharing of lives together. It has caused me to think of my own experience of God. When I look at my experience of God I see different things. I see my special experiences, times when I feel particularly close to God and wonderful things happen inside me. I see my ordinary experiences when I celebrate God's presence within the midst of nature and people and the simple tasks and trials of life. I see the work of God enabling me to serve others, giving me ideas, compassion, and at times, an ear to listen. And then there is more.

Where do I see God? These days I see God in the whole experience of it all. The Christian God is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of Jesus and Mary, the God of Evan and Cheri, the God of past and future. I am still grateful for special experiences of God when they happen. I am still grateful for the ordinary experiences of God, noticing God in the very simple things of life. I am glad when God gifts me with an experience of something that may help others. But today I am especially grateful for God's faithful presence throughout the whole experience of human history and through the span of my own small life.