

Spiritual Experiences that Shape Us.

John 3:1-9, Acts 9:1-6

There are moments in our lives and in the life of the church that shape us. Experiences, spiritual experiences. That's what we are pondering today.

What makes an experience a spiritual experience? Is a spiritual experience the same as a religious experience? An experience that deepens and enlarges your spirit is a spiritual experience. When I lead a course on "Developing a Rule of Life", I begin with this question: "What nurtures or feeds your spirit?" Immediately it broadens the question of spiritual experience. We write the answers on a board then talk about them. What surprises is that most are outside and most are free.

Sometimes our experiences are heightened enough that they shape us. Here's a problem: the church has so narrowed the definition of a spiritual experience that we can miss them when they happen. We go blinkered into the world. When I was growing up the only religious experience was a conversion experience and the only conversion experience was like Paul's on the road to Damascus. A complete reversal. My life, the testimony goes, was in deep trouble, but Jesus saved me. And the worse your life was the better the testimony!

There are two stories from scripture which I chose to frame our discussion.

I

The first, the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes with a question, and Jesus says, “You must be born again!” Then instead of defining what new birth means he talked about the Spirit. It blows where it wills. And it blows in all kinds of ways.

Sometimes it comes as a sweet cool summer breeze, other times it is like a tornado, blowing in and rearranging everything. Sometimes it comes gradually like a flower turning its face almost imperceptibly toward the sun. For some, you’re heading this way, then suddenly the Spirit turns you around and you’re headed in a whole new direction.

William James, the 19th century psychologist of religion wrote his master work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In it he contrasted the “once-born” person and the “twice-born” person. The “once-born” person is one who has felt God’s closeness as far back as they can remember. God has been the air they breathe, the sun that warms their face.

The “twice-born” person lives with a sense of estrangement from God, lives with a “dis-ease” of spirit. And it goes way back. Perhaps they’ve done something that has caused the estrangement. For them they need a “second birth”, a dramatic conversion that brings them into reconciliation with God and life.

II

The quintessential “twice-born” person is Paul, whose dramatic conversion happened on the road to Damascus. “Breathing threats and murder”, the text says, he was on the way to persecute the new followers of Jesus.

Then Jesus appeared in the heavens and said, “Saul, why do you persecute me?” Paul fell from his horse blinded and blind from the light. Flannery O’Connor, southern novelist, wrote:

I reckon the Lord knew the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.

Sometimes, we need to be knocked off our horse!

But for other they cannot remember a moment in time when they became a Christian. Some experience a “childhood mysticism”, a oneness with God all along. John Lewis as a young boy preached to chickens in his backyard. I know a young girl who made altars in her backyard.

Some experience God most deeply in the “un-roofed church” of Creation. As Emily Dickenson who wrote the poem:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—

I keep it, staying at Home—

with a Bobolink for a chorister—
And an Orchard, for a Dome.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman—
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last—
I'm going all along.

For some God comes in experiences of beauty, truth and love, for some in human relationship.

For some the Holy Spirit is a gentle dove resting on our shoulder, for others a Wild Goose, leading us out and leading us on to where we most need to go and where God most needs for us to go.

What experiences have shaped you as persons and us as a church?

Your turn!

Amen