The Sixth Sense
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Every instant a revelation from heaven comes to our innermost souls.
—Rumi

Invitation to Worship: St. John of the Cross (Daniel Lasinsky, trans.)
“What is grace?” I asked God.
And God said, “All that happens.”
Then God added, when I looked perplexed,
“Could not lovers say that every moment in their Beloved’s arms was grace?
Existence is my arms, though I well understand how one can turn away from me
until the heart has wisdom.”

Ancient Witness: Acts 17:22-28a
Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely
religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the
objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an
unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God
who made the world and everything in it, the Sovereign of heaven and earth, does not live
in shrines made by human hands, and isn’t served by human hands, as though in need of
anything. No, God is the One who gives everyone life and breath. From one ancestor
God created all of humankind to inhabit the whole earth, and allotted the times of their
existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that human beings
would seek, reach out for and perhaps find the One who is not really far from any of us—
the One in whom we live and move and have our being.”

There’s a story told by Coleman Barks about a man in prison who is sent a prayer rug by his
friend. He would have wanted, of course, a file or a crowbar or a key. But he began using the
rug, doing five-times prayer before dawn, at noon, mid-afternoon, after sunset, and before sleep.
Bowing, sitting up, bowing again, he notices an odd pattern in the weave of the rug, just at the
quibla, the point where his head touches. He studies and meditates on this pattern, and gradually
discovers and realizes that it is a diagram of the lock that confines him in his cell and how it
works. So he’s able to escape!

This morning, I want to say some things about the mystical experience of feeling or experiencing
God’s presence. This ever-present Reality is always before us. And when we are able to discern
this Presence, we become free. We are liberated at the moment of recognition and perception.
The door to life is unlocked!

It was Proust who said that the voyage of discovery lies not in seeking new vistas but in having
new eyes.

It is difficult to know many things for certain about the historical person, Jesus. But we do know
this: Jesus spoke of a profound experience of the presence of God. Furthermore, he was not
interested in having other people worship him for having this experience. He was most
interested in encouraging others to have this same experience of communion or unity with the Sacred Presence.

For Jesus, my primary spiritual teacher, the kingdom was a present mystical reality, the ultimate reality. Its splendor is always around us, and it is only our blindness that prevents us from seeing the wonder of it and living in it. He often said, “Let those who have eyes, see. And those who have ears, hear.” The door to the kingdom—to an interconnected relationship of the divine with all things—lies always open.

Jesus said, “The kingdom is inside you.” In other words, it is not located in a particular place, outside time. The kingdom is now; it is here; it is the inmost heart and core of reality itself; it is our inmost consciousness.

Yet, for Jesus, the kingdom is also beyond us, outside of us. Andrew Harvey wrote:

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\text{To wake up to the kingdom “inside,” then is to wake up to the potential presence of the kingdom in all of reality...to the glory of the relationship of total love that God is offering everyone...}
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And so in his teaching, Jesus calls for a certain kind of perception, a certain kind of attention. “For lack of attention,” writes the English mystic Evelyn Underhill, “a thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day.” Gandhi once said, “God speaks to us every day only we don’t know how to listen.”

Jesus lived and perceived life in such a way that God’s kingdom was fully present to him. And Jesus just didn’t want others to take his word for it; he wanted others to experience it, too.

The Hindus greet each other by bowing with folded hands against the breastbone, saying “Namaste.” This mini-ceremony means, “I salute the divinity within you.” This is the kind of perception Jesus was talking about. “To grasp God in all things—this is the sign of your new birth,” wrote Meister Eckhart.

Another mystic, St. John of the Cross, wrote about moving from the old level of consciousness to a “new state,” as one “liberated from a cramped prison cell.”

We see that like Jesus, the apostle Paul has his mystical side in this little vignette at Athens at a time not unlike today. Athens was one of the main cultural centers of the world. It was an exciting and stimulating place to live. It was a time of great spiritual searching. It was a melting pot of philosophical schools of thought and religious movements. And Paul and his band of followers seemed to be just one among many there.

So what happened was that Paul went to the synagogue to talk with religious Jews and later to the market place, striking up conversations with people about what was important in his life: the God revealed in the life of Jesus.

And among all who were there were some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who kind of looked down their noses at Paul and said, “What is this fool talking about?”
The followers of Epicurus (b. 342 BCE) said that the chief purpose in life was to find satisfaction or happiness. They attempted to train themselves to be satisfied no matter what because pleasure was a state of mind. “The wise man will be happy on the rack,” Epicurus said. “Don’t worry. Be happy.”

The Stoics followed a man named Zeno. And they accused the Epicureans of worrying too much about themselves. What matters most of all, they said, was being good. It doesn’t matter if you are happy or sad, in pleasure or pain, just as long as you were virtuous.

Both the Stoics and the Epicureans thought that the present physical world was evil, that these disgusting physical bodies were holding our souls prisoner, and that we should transcend this physical world by using the mind and focusing upon other things like virtue or happiness.

And so here comes Paul, and he affirms them. “I perceive that in every way you are religious,” he says. And he likes their altar “to an unknown god.” And then he starts talking about the divine Logos becoming flesh—what a detestable and ridiculous thought. The material and spiritual are joined together, inseparable. The physical world is not evil but is, in fact, the dwelling place of God.

Paul says, “The God who made the world…does not live in shrines made by human hands.” Instead, this God exists as the “life and breath” of everything. God is infused into the world, incarnate in the here and now, at the heart of everything. God “is not far from each one of us,” he says. God is the basis of reality itself, in whom “we live and move and have our being.”

And then Paul takes this a step further and says, “God made all people (all people!) …that they might feel after and find God.” This really is an amazing spiritual statement. To feel after, to grope for, and then to find, perceive and experience the Presence of God here and now—this goes beyond the objective, beyond the mind; it is an activity of the heart.

Like Jesus, Paul is pointing to a direct, interior experience of the Holy, which is really all mysticism is, by the way. There is a certain kind of encounter that we, in fact, are created for, he says.

It’s not that our conventional senses aren’t helpful; they are. The images, the sounds, the tastes, the smells, the touch, ideas, thoughts, insights, memories—they all can point toward The Sacred, and God is often at work in them. These experiences can be beautiful, meaningful, and wonderful, but these experiences aren’t necessarily God. Often they are mere reflections, at best.

Often we talk about experiencing or perceiving God’s presence, God’s grace as if we “see” it or “hear” it. Often we talk about sensing God’s love as an intuition or a mental image. But what I’m saying today is that apprehending God is quite unlike all these things.

What I am talking about is a direct experience of the Holy that is beyond all sense and all understanding. Any language that we use is just approximation.

I am reminded of a lecture I heard Andrew Greely give about 25 years ago, now. He said that the job of the preacher is not to impart experiences of grace to the hearer. Everyone, he said, by the very nature of reality, already experiences grace! As Rumi wrote, “Every instant a revelation from heaven comes to our innermost souls.” Every person, every thing, already has direct
experience of the Holy, all the time. We just don’t notice. So the job of a sermon or an anthem or worship is simply to help raise these experiences that we already have to the surface of awareness. Our job is to nurture that sixth sense. The job of a spiritual community is not to tell people what to believe but how to see.

Let me put it this way: How does one describe a sense to someone who has never had that sense? Warmth? Softness? The color blue. The taste of an orange? Apple pie baking? Beautiful music? And what if there were another sense that we have as human beings that would allow us to feel God directly? That would allow us to experience the Oneness, the Wholeness, the Wisdom that is more than the sum of the parts.

I saw a TV show once about sharks. And it said that sharks have a sense that few other animals have, a kind of electromagnetic location sense. And it occurred to me that we can talk about the shark’s unique sense, but we have no way of really understanding what it is like.

Most of us would find it difficult to imagine our lives without any one of our human senses. Not only would our lives become more difficult, we would miss so much beauty and enjoyment. If you had to give up a sense, which would it be? It is hard to imagine life without it. And I wondered, what kind of beauty and enjoyment does the shark experience with its extra sense that we are missing?

This is how we can think about faith. It is not about an experience through our conventional senses, although these can help point the way. It is not about thinking about or understanding stories of other people’s experiences. As Keirkegaard said, when it comes to faith, “every generation begins all over again.”

We can remember that this is what religion is about: we are called to develop our sixth sense. We are called to develop our spiritual selves and experience the very presence of God, directly and immediately.

The famous preacher, David Reed, once said,

*We have failed to present the gospel as a living experience. We have become reporters of religious experience of others from Abraham to Bonhoeffer, rather than catalysts of the living Christ.*

There was a movie that came out a while ago, *The Sixth Sense*. And you probably remember one of the classic lines in cinema when this young boy whispers, “I see dead people.”

One could say that we all have this sixth sense, not to see dead people, but to experience the Holy. It’s a sense unlike the five others. It’s about seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling, but in a way that is different.

Let me put it a different way. Many people yearn to have a spiritual experience. We may ask God to make herself known to us, to give us a sign we can see, hear or touch. But spiritual experience is not about God doing anything differently. It’s not about God deciding to miraculously appear to our five senses. No, spiritual experience is about the seer not what is seen. It’s about whether we can sense something that has been there all the time. For the spiritual experience, it is *we* who change, not God.
Some religious traditions refer to this as the “third eye,” or the “inner eye,” the brow chakra, which is right here between our eyes on the forehead. This, it seems to me, is a metaphor for the contemplative, mystical way of seeing and experiencing—the sixth sense.

And like other skills this takes effort to develop seeing with the inner eye: worship, prayer, contemplation, meditation, study, spiritual practice. Like an athlete, we sharpen and develop our ability, not expecting other people to do our work for us. But we train with diligence. We don’t come to spiritual community as passive recipients, but we are encouraged and challenged to do the work ourselves. We come here like we come to the gym. We’re here to work out, and then to go home and work out some more. And so we commit ourselves to this, like five times a day prayer, day after day after day, until one day we see and are released. And that’s not the end—hardly! It’s more of a beginning of a continual, ongoing discipline and way of living.

And so let’s take a famous story of a spiritual experience when Moses “sees” the burning bush. He sees, it seems to me, not just with his ordinary eyesight, as a superficial reading might lead us to think. Rather, he sees with his sixth sense, his spiritual sense. That is a story not about God speaking differently all of a sudden, but about Moses hearing, seeing, and feeling differently. This happens, you recall, after Moses goes up the mountain on a spiritual quest. He focuses himself and trains himself upon the Sacred Presence. He makes himself open and receptive to a Reality that is already and always there.

As Meister Eckhart said, “God is home. It is we who have gone out for a walk.”

It’s a wonderful thing to observe the lives of people animated by love, by God. And it’s wonderful to hear stories of faith and courage in which we can trace the Eternal Spirit (stories of Moses, for instance). But better yet, may we dare to sense keenly the real thing ourselves.

For when we experience life through our spiritual sense—if only for an instant, a flash—then every bush is a burning bush, and everything blazes with the presence of God.

(Note: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)