

“Finding God in the Waves: Is Faith Social Conditioning?”
Acts 9:1-19

Over the last two years, there has been an intensifying attack on science by many Christians. We saw that especially when it came to the misinformation that was being spread about Covid-19 and the vaccines that were developed. One great response that I saw is this: “Science is not truth. Science is finding the truth. When science changes its opinion, it didn't lie to you. It learned more.”

I believe that the same can be said about faith. It is not that any religion can be giving us the full truth of life and God. There is always more to learn and grow into. The challenge is to keep faith fluid and open with a focus on the mystery of our relationship with God.

In his book *Sacred Earth Sacred Soul*, John Philip Newell tells the story of Alexander John Scott who in 1831 stood before the “the Church of Scotland...the nation’s highest ecclesiastical court accused of heresy. He had refused to sign the Westminster Confession of Faith, the church’s principal statement of belief... Among other things, the Westminster Confession of Faith states that we are born ‘wholly defiled’ in body and in soul, ‘and wholly inclined to all evil.’ Scott had been teaching that at the heart of Christian wisdom is the belief that the divine and the human are one...Scott used the image of royal garments woven through with a golden thread to speak of a relationship between the divine and the human within us...he spoke of Jesus as embodying this truth...In keeping with these views, Scott opposed the doctrine of original sin in the Westminster Confession of Faith...Using the analogy of a plant suffering from blight to speak of the way sin affects our nature, he said that botanists would not define such a plant in terms of its blight...The Church of Scotland felt threatened by this young teacher, aged only twenty-six.”

Unfortunately, this is just one example of how stepping out of the social or religious norms of our day can be seen and treated as a threat to the whole system. It is easy to look back and think, “What is the big deal?” But when we look at our social norms, it is hard for us to move beyond them when our sense of belonging depends on them or when we are convinced that our group is always right or has the whole truth. Keeping faith pliable and fluid is often very hard for religion which often defines itself by its boundaries.

This was the challenge which God faced with Paul. Let’s watch a short video about Paul: https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/gospel-acts-2/?utm_source=web_social_share&medium=shared_video. Paul was conditioned from an early age to be a good defender of the faith. In the name of God and of the “true” faith, he did not have a problem hating or oppressing others. This was what others did around him and so he followed along. This was the social and religious conditioning of his day. But Paul had another side to him. He had a deep practice of faith. God had already touched his heart, but the pressures of the world had gotten in the way. He even witnessed the violent killing of an innocent man. Here is a painting of the events described in Acts about the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the church. Paul was sitting there watching it and helping those who were killing Stephen by guarding their cloaks.

How does God get through to someone who is so complicit in a hate crime and who is so convinced that he has the full truth? Not easily!!! The only way was for Paul to lose his sight physically and to have a powerful mystical experience. On the way to Damascus, Paul was knocked down to the ground and physically lost his sight. This is very symbolic as this temporary blindness was what enabled him to move away from his path of hate. He had to lose sight of what he knew in order for something new to be born in him. What was crucial in this experience for Paul was having a group of people who were willing to allow him the space to discover a new vision for life and faith, a vision that was much more expansive of God's love. Imagine yourself being Ananias! What if God called you to reach out to a sworn enemy of your people?

We often romanticize this story as a wonderful conversion story, but imagine it happening to you! What if you were so convinced your whole life that your faith was the only true faith and that those who were challenging that belief were gaining strength and numbers? Not so easy to make the turn. It takes God's power and a loving community to help us navigate such change. It takes communities who are not trying to limit us and fit into a set of beliefs and teachings but who are willing to pray with us and help us to practice the faith. Paul finally learned the lesson of faith about staying open to new revelation. But many of us are often closed to that wisdom. We use the Bible, our doctrines, our ideas, and even our own experiences to build fortresses of faith that end up trapping us and keeping us from growing.

In his book, *Finding God in the Waves*, Mike McHargue notes that, "Our Western culture wants a clear winner, and a lot of this has to do with our neurological craving for certainty. My prefrontal cortex wants me to believe that it's in control, that through it I'm making rational decisions based on an objective assessment of reality. This illusion is great for helping me sift through the overwhelming amount of information that is reality, but it's an oversimplified picture of what's really going on. Contrary to what we may feel, we humans weren't designed to find truth or objective reality...This matters a lot if you're someone who's trying to reconcile your inner Christian with the part of you that feels skepticism and wants hard proof for the things you believe."

I would like to invite you this week to consider the spiritual practice of looking with soft eyes. This comes from the Japanese self-defense art of aikido, in which one learns to widen their peripheral vision. When we get into our modes of certainty or feel attacked, our eyes narrow their focus. So this practice helps us to let go of that defensive fear. One learns to relax their eyelids and thus stop focusing their vision on only one thing. Let's practice this for a second. Allow the muscles around the eyes to relax, and to let our focus be gentle. Start noticing all the things that you can instead of focusing on one thing. This could become a great way to deal with conflict or things that seem paradoxical. Instead of dealing with the conflict head on, you start noticing what is going on with the person you are talking to or with you internally. You let go of the need to control the situation and you become an observer taking in the larger reality. The same can be done with faith. Soft eyes can help us let go of our judgmental thoughts to practice a faith that is open, flexible, and always ready to grow and expand.

Here are some beautiful words from Steven Charleston who shares indigenous wisdom from his Choctaw Nation wisdom: "The mystery will not be solved, the power of the mystery will not be denied, for the transcendent presence of the holy surrounds us, will always surround us, and the greatness of the Spirit will endure forever. Be not afraid or anxious. The threshold on which you stand is the mystery of an infinite love, and an intimate love, a love that beckons you into its peace, that welcomes you with a limitless compassion. Be not afraid or anxious. Close your eyes. Open your heart. And you will know what I mean." Amen.