

"Finding God in the Waves: Beyond Contradictions"
Judges 6:36-40

In the book *Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints*, Daneen Akers talks about a mystical experience Brian McLaren had when he was a young man on the edge of losing his faith. "On a hot summer night in 1972, in Lexington, Kentucky, a small group of teenagers walk stealthily in the dark, having just snuck out of their cabins at church camp. The thrill of adventure energizes them as they hike up a small hillside at the far end of the camp. A nervous laugh escapes from one of them, breaking the silence. 'Shhh!' a voice from the back whispers. 'We'll be in a ton of trouble if we get caught.' They keep walking, trying to avoid the rocks and twigs in the path with just the light of the moon to guide them. One of these teenagers is 17-year-old Brian McLaren. He's grown up going to lots of church events with his family. He hasn't told anyone, but he's planning to leave church, faith, and most everything having to do with God when he goes away to college in a year. His church teaches that science is not valid, that women can't be leaders, and that it's wrong to ask questions about anything the church teaches. He's different: He's curious, loves science, and doesn't believe men are better at leadership (or anything else) than women. He can't wait to get out of the church.

As they reach the top of the hillside, he walks a few feet away from the group and lies down on his back in the grass. He gazes up at the moon and stars and just breathes. Suddenly Brian notices how small he feels under the immense sky. The universe above him goes on and on with its burning stars, distant planets, moons, and galaxies.

'I'm just one small human with millions and billions of other humans spinning on this planet in this huge universe,' he thinks to himself. It's a new thought for him. A revelation. A moment later, he feels something else. Or someone else.

'I felt seen, known, and loved,' Brian says now, remembering that night. 'I felt an outpouring of love that completely covered me. And it wasn't just for me. It was also an outpouring of love for the grass in the field next to me, for everything. All of creation was loved. I experienced God as love that night.'"

Brian's experience of God that night changed the course of his life. 'That experience set me on a path. I realized that religion wasn't just what other people told me or what a book told me. I was an active participant in faith. And love was at the center.'

Such experiences remind us that God is beyond the grasp or control of our limited human experiences, a holy mystery to be embraced and talked about in poetry and prayer instead of doctrines and certainties.

Scientific or logical explanations of mystical experiences often fall short of capturing their wonder. In his book, *Finding God in the Waves*, Mike McHargue tells of a time when he shared such a mystical experience he had by the ocean. After sharing about his experience with a crowd, one person challenged him saying, "You talk about brain scans as if that proves anything. We can do a brain scan while someone thinks of a unicorn, but

that doesn't make unicorns real. Or we could brain scan someone on LSD, but that doesn't make their hallucinations part of material reality. If you really heard a voice, don't you think a socially induced hallucination is the most likely source?"

McHargue reflected on this by saying that his inner conflicts were not gone after the mystical experience. Instead, what he learned is to live with the tension between his inner Christian and inner skeptic. He wrote, "My inner Christian was affirmed and ready to proclaim this 'Good News' with evangelistic fervor. But my inner skeptic was offended that 'God' was even in the running as a possible explanation. If you found a \$20 bill in your jacket pocket, you wouldn't assume Santa Claus put it there. How did I know my experience had anything to do with God?"

McHargue learned from his experience the following, "the need for certainty is an addiction we can kick –that it's possible to have faith, and even follow Christ, without needing to defend historical Christianity like a doctoral thesis. We can approach beliefs not as gems to be mined from the earth and protected with clenched fists, but as butterflies that land on an open hand –as gifts to enjoy but not possess."

In our Bible story for this week, we hear about a man who wanted to get certainty about his faith and about the guidance of God. This story comes from the book of Judges. This is the period of history after the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt by Moses, wandered in the wilderness for forty years and then entered in the land of promise. A few years had passed, and they had judges who were leading them. This was a period of about 300 years. The dominant pattern of the book of Judges is that people would do what was evil and then a leader would come and help lead them back to the ways of God. Judges in those days were the leaders/rulers of their people. Today's Bible story is about one of these judges. His name was Gideon. He was called to be a military leader and a judge. But he felt ill-equipped. There was a whole landscape of fear and doubt in his life. Gideon was the lowliest member of the lowliest clan of Manasseh. He did not consider himself to be adequate for the call. Gideon wanted to make sure that God was not going to leave him and that his leadership was going to be accepted. Gideon wanted to make sure that the results were going to be good. He did not want to lead his people to death. He wanted to ensure that his military campaign was going to be successful. He wanted control and so he set up several tests for God. He wanted clear signs. Gideon's enemies were powerful. This was a huge risk for Gideon and his people. Gideon only had trumpets and clay pitchers with torches hidden in them. Thus, the risk was very high and his trust in God was to be totally based on faith and not on any sense of control or skill. Here is a short video introduction to the story from the Bible Project:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOYy8iCfIJ4>

Gideon wanted a sign from God so that he could really trust. He could not imagine risking his people's safety and wellbeing based on faith. What is interesting is that even after Gideon got his signs and won the battles, he lost his way. His faith was only skin deep. He ended up worshipping an idol and led his people to idolatry! In other words, there is no science or proof strong enough to chase away all of our struggles, misgivings, or doubts. The work of faith is to always lean into our relationship with the divine.

And so today we are invited to lean into the presence of God. We are going to pray a prayer by Brian McLaren based on the story of Moses' mystical encounter with God in the burning bush. When Moses asked for God's name the answer came as "I am who I am" according to Exodus 3:14.

I invite you to breathe deeply. Let the weight of your soul rest back on the presence and love of God. Just be here. You might want to hear, in your imagination, the living God calling your name repeated twice as with Moses, inviting you to reply, "Here I am." Repeat these words within your spirit, "Here I am. Here you are. Here we are together." Then you may want to progress to, "Who are you? Who am I? Who Are we together?" Amen.