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“Visits with God”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Third Sunday of Easter (Year C)

April 10, 2016

Acts 9:1–6 (7–20); Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11–14; John 21:1–19

How does the holy make itself known us mere mortals?

For me, God first appeared every night in the form of a book

that my father would bring to my room to read with me before bedtime,
called *Little Visits with God*.

Each story is about a child who faces a moral dilemma

where a decision usually is required: to share or not to share,
to brag or not to brag,

to love next-door neighbors of a different faith or to fear them,
to say what one really thinks or to hold one’s tongue?

Hmmm, I’m thinking already that some of our political candidates might do well
to read a chapter or two of *Little Visits with God* each night!

(Allan Hart Jahsmann and Martin P. Simon. *Little Visits with God*,
More Little Visits with God. Concordia: St. Louis, 1957, 1961)

And once we had completed *Little Visits with God*, then there was the sequel,
More Little Visits with God, which I still have in my possession.

The chapter that is most weathered, torn out, and scarred by old Scotch tape,

I notice, is one called “Little Lies and Big Harm” which makes me wonder
if truth telling were not my forte as a child, perhaps???

The worst thing about *Little Visits with God* was that just when I would be

at the point of nodding off to sleep while listening to the story,
there would be those pesky questions at the end
which my father would nudge me awake to answer. I hated those questions!
The story was okay, the final prayer was okay, but the questions were brutal
because you couldn't really answer them truthfully without implicating
yourself as a heathen child of God-fearing parents.

Nevertheless, the best thing about *Little Visits with God* is that my father
would sit beside me every night to read in his deep voice,
and the mattress would slant toward him,
and I would roll into him because I could not resist
the gravity of his nearness or the warmth of his presence.

And for me, that represented God more than the didactic story or the questions.

And the worldview conveyed to me by this early spiritual formation
was that if I would be a good girl, if I just could behave correctly,
then God would love me and everything would be hunky dory.

The Apostle Paul has a little visit with God, too, a little tête-à-tête with Jesus,
who pulls the road to Damascus right out from underneath his feet,
knocks him off his high horse of vigilante justice,
and gobsmacks him with three days of light denied timeout
to reconsider his hate-driven agenda and future trajectory.

Paul's bedtime story sounds more like a nightmare straight out of Flannery O'Connor,
where sometimes God visits people in the form of a raging bull,
or a runaway tractor, or a book beamed at their head
in the doctor's office waiting room.

For Paul, his little visit with Jesus comes to him first in a visual form,
much like the Lord's visit to Moses as a burning bush, yet with greater intensity,
with blinding intensity detected by Paul, yet unnoticed by his companions.

Apparently, there is something that Jesus wishes for Paul to *see differently*:
a worldview that is less myopic, that requires adjustment,

that needs *new eyes* and kingdom lenses in order
to align with God's worldview.

And Jesus' little visit, this theophany, has an auditory quality, too,
detected by his friends as sound, yet understood by Paul *as voice*:
the voice that Paul recognizes as *Lord*,
but not necessarily as *Jesus*, nor as *Jesus as Lord*,
nor as Jesus as *the Way of grace to a future now scripted by God*.

I wonder if Jesus sat down beside Paul as he lay immobilized on the road,
and I wonder if he asked him questions in his semi-conscious state,
in his deep voice, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Why would a scholar of scripture be so blind to who I am? Why hate me so?"

And I wonder if the road tilted towards Jesus in the course of their *conversation*,
and if Paul could resist neither the gravity of the risen Lord,
or the warmth of his presence, thus recognizing *Lord, as Jesus, as God?*

Conversation and conversion come from the same Latin word roots,
from *conversari*, to turn to one another,
frequentative of *convertere*, to turn around.

I wonder if conversion is grounded in conversation, the face-to-face
question and answers of day to day life?

This little visit with Jesus certainly turns Paul's world around, and thus ours.

Little visits with God. Some of them are epic.

Evelyn Underhill, the British pacifist and writer, attributes much of her faith journey
to *conversations (there's that word)* about Jesus
with her mentor, Baron Friedrich von Hugel,
an authority on religious philosophy and spiritual experience.

In a letter to him following World War I, written in June 1923, she writes:

*Last October, one day when I was praying, quite suddenly a Voice seemed to
speak to me—with tremendous staccato sharpness and clearness. It only said
one short thing, first in Latin, and then in English... The effect was terrific. Sort of*

nailed me to the floor for half an hour, which went as a flash. I felt definitely called out and settled, once for all—that any falling back or leaving off, after that, will be an unpardonable treason. That sense has persisted—it marked a sort of turning point and the end of all the remorse and worry, and banging about... I feel a total, unconditional dedication is what is asked, and it is so difficult. I shall never do it—one fails at every corner.

(Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulder. *Conversions*, p. 186)

Underhill went on from that little visit to become a prolific writer, contemplative and spiritual counselor, much in demand during the ensuing years.

C.S. Lewis, the scholarly atheist, had a little visit with God,

which he described in his book, *Surprised by Joy*, published in 1955.

Lewis refuses to limit the meaning of “joy” to mere happiness, pleasure or gladness.

Instead he uses it to encompass a measure of agony and grief as well,

as he recounts a primal little visitation by the holy.

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired NOT to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In... 1929, I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing: the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? (Conversions, p. 201)

This was Lewis’ conversion to Theism, to belief in God. His conversion to Christianity came later, and you’ll love his description of the Church

which he refers to as “the zoo!”

As soon as I became a Theist, I started attending the parish church on Sundays and my college chapel on weekdays, not because I believed in Christianity... but because I thought one ought to "fly one's flag" by some unmistakable overt sign... But though I liked clergymen like bears, I had as little wish to be in the Church as in the zoo. It was, to begin with, a kind of collective, a wearisome "get-together" affair... the fussy, time-wasting botheration of it all! The bells, the crowds, the umbrellas, the notices, the bustle, the perpetual arranging and organizing. Hymns were (and are) extremely disagreeable to me. Of all musical instruments I liked (and like) the organ least. I have, too, a sort of spiritual gaucherie which makes me unapt to participate in any rite... I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade on a sunny morning. When we set out, I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo, I did... It was alike when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless, becomes aware that he is not awake. (Conversions, p. 203)

Sounds a little like the slanting bed/gravity of God phenomena, doesn't it?

And then there was Malcom Muggeridge, the World War II correspondent

and post-war editor of the British magazine, *Punch*, who found himself

bumping into Jesus in the most unlikely places. He says in 1961:

And You (Jesus)? I never caught even a glimpse of You in any paradise—unless You were an old, shoeshine man on a windy corner in Chicago one February morning, smiling from ear to ear, or a little man with a lame leg in the Immigration Department in New York, whose smiling patience as he listened to one Puerto Rican after another seemed to reach from there to eternity. Oh, and whoever painted the front of the little church in the woods... near Moscow—painted it in blues as bright as the sky and whites that outshone the snow? That might have been You. Or again at Kiev, at an Easter service when the collectivization famine was in full swing... What a congregation was packed in tight, squeezed together like sardines! I myself was pressed against a stone pillar

and scarcely able to breathe. Not that I wanted to particularly. So many gray, hungry faces, all luminous like an El Greco painting, and all singing. How they sang—about how there was no help except in You, nowhere to turn to except to You, nothing that could possibly bring any comfort except You. I could have touched You then... At the intersection of time and eternity—nailed there—You confront us, a perpetual reminder that living, we die, and dying, we live. An incarnation wonderful to contemplate, the light of the world, indeed. (Conversions, p. 252)

The worldview conveyed in *Little Visits with God*

that if I would be a good girl, if I could behave correctly,
then God would love me and everything would be just hunky-dory,
unfortunately was not strong enough to tide me over into adulthood,
nor was it particularly Christocentric, although the intimacy of
the messenger, his voice, his warmth, his patience, hinted at such.

It took something more Flanneryesque: a little out-of-body visit with God,
more akin to John of Patmos' oracle of God's holy temple,

where myriads and myriads and thousands and thousands
accept the worth conferred upon them, not by being good,
but by being forgiven by the Lamb who was slaughtered.

It took a surprising little conversation over some fish and toast with the risen Lord
for Peter to see that he would be given a second chance to feed God's sheep.

And it took a surprise knock-out jolt for Paul

and a little conversation in a supine position
when the world slanted for just a moment towards the holy,
and the gravity, warmth, and grace of the risen Lord was just too much to resist
for Paul to see that he also would be given a second chance to
align his journey with a future now scripted by God.

A few final observations about these little visits with the holy.

Some, obviously, are quite dramatic, and others more subtle.
All of them, as C.S. Lewis notes, come with an element of surprise.

Who pencils in a visit by Jesus on his or her daily planner?

Who schedules an annual check-up with God?

And all of them, I want to say, require a response by the recipient:

“Feed my lambs.”

“Go to the house on the street called Straight.”

“Take care of my sheep.”

“Be my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles.”

“Feed my sheep.”

O Lord, how shall I meet You, how welcome You aright?

Your people long to greet You, my hope, my heart's delight!

O kindle, Lord most holy, a lamp within my breast,

*To **do** in spirit lowly all that may please You best. Amen.*