

Last Epiphany
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2-27-22

GOD BEAMS

One summer morning, I looked out the kitchen window and saw the sun starting to burn through the fog that often rolls in from the nearby Connecticut River. The sun was at the level of the treetops in my neighbor's front yard. Shafts of golden light cut through the tall trees onto the broad expanse of lawn below. This other-worldly tableau lacked only a heavenly choir to complete the picture. My young granddaughter was visiting at the time. She looked out the window and exclaimed, "God beams!"

I rushed out with the digital camera I use for landscape work and began taking pictures. In my haste to get a shot of the God beams, I failed to notice there was no memory card in the camera. By the time I loaded the memory card and got back outside, the sun had burned through the fog. The moment was lost. I am usually pretty careful about checking to make sure the memory card is in the camera, and the battery is charged. A rookie mistake, and I didn't have the excuse of being a rookie.

Beyond the ethereal atmospherics, there was nothing that morning to suggest that God was actually about to put in an appearance on my neighbor's lawn. And yet my granddaughter, who is not being raised in a religious household, did not hesitate to attach his name to the phenomenon.

Heavenly beams are a bit of a cliché, of course. Light has long been associated with divinity. But why? Theologian Paul H. Andrews traces it back to the universal experience of being born. Suddenly bright lights pierce the darkness of our nine-month gestation in the womb. Andrews writes: "This frightening postpartum experience, universal among human beings, has helped shape the structure of the evolving human psyche." Thereafter, the sudden appearance of a bright light may trigger powerful emotions associated with entering an entirely new realm of human experience.

The Eastern Orthodox have a term for light that appears to shine from another world. They call it "uncreated light." Uncreated light is what Moses beheld on the slopes of Mt. Horeb, when he turned aside to see the bush that burned but was not consumed. It was a light from heaven that blinded Saul of Tarsus, later to be known as St. Paul, on the road to Damascus.

The defining moment, according to St. Gregory Palamas, was the gospel account of the Transfiguration that we read this morning. Jesus and three of his disciples ascended a tall mountain to pray. There, according to the gospel, Jesus "was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light." As an added bonus, Moses and the Prophet Elijah appeared beside him — the two marble figures who keep company with Jesus on the high altar behind me.

Gregory Palamas was a 14th-century Greek monk and theologian. He wrote of this event: "The Lord came to send fire upon the earth, and through participation in this fire He makes divine not just the human substance which He assumed for our sake, but every person who is found worthy of communion with Him."

For Palamas, uncreated light exists in the eye of the beholder. But not every eye is fit to behold it. "Take note that eyes with natural vision are blind to that light," he said. "It is invisible, and

those who behold it do so not simply with their bodily eyes, but with eyes transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Jesus taught that those who were pure in heart can see God. By the same token, Palamas advised those wishing to see the uncreated light of God to repent, purify themselves of their worldly passions and practice certain spiritual disciplines. In effect, those who receive the vision of divine radiance do so by becoming like God themselves. This is a process known in the Orthodox tradition as *theosis*.

I'd like to know where Palamas got the idea you needed to be worthy of communion with God to see this otherworldly light. By that standard, I'm not sure any of the biblical prototypes would have measured up. Moses was a murderer and fugitive when he turned aside to see the bush burning in the Sinai wilderness. The prophet Isaiah lamented, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

How about St. Paul? He styled himself the foremost of sinners when he had his blinding encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Then there were the apostles who witnessed the Transfiguration. They later distinguished themselves by abandoning Jesus after he was arrested and taken away to be crucified.

The issue in my mind is not why a select few are privileged to see light from heaven but why everybody doesn't. The novelist Aldous Huxley, an early experimenter in psychedelic drugs, addressed this question in a long essay entitled "The Doors of Perception." The title was taken from William Blake's poem, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." Blake wrote,

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man
as it is, infinite
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow
chinks of his cavern.

Huxley believed that normal waking consciousness functions as a kind of reducing valve. It filters out the vast flood of sensory stimuli that might otherwise overwhelm our ability to go about our business.

Huxley used mescaline to bypass these inhibitors. He believed this enabled him to experience what Buddhists refer to as "clear seeing," if only for a brief time. Having experimented with psychedelic drugs myself long ago, I find I can often achieve many of the same effect these days merely by picking up a camera. The camera becomes a high-powered extension of my visual cortex. It allows me to operate without the blinders of the conceptual mind. The world becomes pure light, color, shapes and texture, contained by nothing but the viewfinder of my camera. It is a world without names, a world unframed by any thought.

At such times I understand that fire from the gods has indeed been placed in the hands of mortals. At such times I see that the light from another world is actually the light from this one. "Change the focus of the eye," the mythologist Joseph Campbell advised. "When you have done that, then the end of the world as you formerly knew it will have occurred, and you will experience the radiance of the divine presence everywhere, here and now."

I am only mildly regretful that I missed my moment with the God beams on my neighbor's lawn. It's not like I failed to get a shot of a flying-saucer landing or Big Foot strolling down my street. All I have to do is keep my eye peeled the next time the sun breaks through the fog outside my kitchen window. The missed shot might have been lovely. But as my granddaughter's characterization suggests, clichéd interpretations are hard to avoid when you picture golden shafts of light streaming from heaven. I note that Jesus was unenthusiastic about his disciples'

proposal to erect shrines to commemorate the Transfiguration. I find it a far greater artistic challenge to capture God's presence in scenes shot by the ordinary light of day. Amen.