

Epiphany 2 (MP-2) (2020)

Andrew Greely, a 20th century Roman Catholic writer, once observed: **“We are a nation of mystics.”**

I think he is right.

Think, for example, what you find in many of our cities, especially old historic ones . . . evening ghost walks. If I am not mistaken, Blue Ridge has one.

Also think about how often articles about the supernatural appear in periodicals . . . how many documentaries on the subject are aired each year on television.

Why is it that we humans seem to have such a fascination with mystical experiences, with the supernatural?

Here is my suggestion.

We know in our heart of hearts that there must be something more to life than what can be measured in a test tube or entered in a ledger book. There must be something else out there. So, consciously or unconsciously, we find ourselves on a search.

On another level, we long for truth and beauty which transcends what can be seen with the naked human eye. I want to suggest that we are wired for spirituality.

Long ago, the most influential thinker in the Christian West – St. Augustine of Hippo – wrote, addressing God:

“Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee.”

There is a God-shaped space within each one of us.

This, at least partially, explains people’s fascination with the unseen and spiritual. As spiritual beings, we seek spiritual things.

Can the quest for the mystical go wrong, lead people into error?

Absolutely, I am thinking now of such things as seances, tarot card and Ouija boards. These things are not only unhealthy, but potentially demonic.

At the same time, I am thinking about the interest in Eastern religions that we have seen on the rise in recent times . . . *New Age*, as it is sometimes called.

So, caution is needed in the realm of the spiritual. The admonition found in 1 John 4:1 still holds:

“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God.”

Always, always put experiences, mystical or otherwise, up against the Scriptures. If they don’t measure up, cast them aside.

With that said, however, mystical experiences can be vehicles of grace . . . can be God-sent and valuable.

If you are looking for an example, look no further than today’s New Testament reading. Here, we have St. Mark’s account of the Transfiguration, a mystical experience if there ever was one and one that was filled with grace from beginning to end.

What is the ‘mystical’ anyway?

I like the definition given by evangelist and Christian apologist Bishop Robert Barron. He defines the mystical as:

“The experiencing of spiritual things within the ordinary.

Isn’t that we find happening with the inner circle of the Twelve in today’s reading?

Jesus remains in His ordinary physical body, yet their eyes are opened to see more?

More than that, there are certain regular and reoccurring symbols that mystics often use to describe their experiences. **Height, light and hearing a voice** are three.

All can be found in the story of the Transfiguration.

Height. Where does Jesus take the three disciples? To the top of a mountain.

What happens to there? They see farther than they have ever seen before.

No long is Jesus just their teacher but the One who is greater than Moses and Elijah . . . the who is the *telos* or goal of Israel's long history . . . the One who must be obeyed.

Think of that line in Martin Luther King's speech on the day before he was killed: **"I've been to the mountain top."**

That was the experience of these three disciples. After that, they could never be the same.

Another common and reoccurring symbol used by mystics is **light**.

We find this symbol in the story of the Transfiguration as well. Light emanated from Jesus' face, just as it had in former times from the face of Moses. With light came illumination and clarity for these three disciples.

If I may, I'd like to share two personal experiences involving illumination. Both, by the way, took place while I was driving car. So, if you ever see me barrelling down the roadway with a dazed or dazzled look on my face, get out of the way!

The first was the moment it hit me not only that I should go to theological college and seek ordination but also where the money was going to come from to bring this about. It came in a flash on a certain highway in Jackson, Miss.

The other was the moment I knew I should settle in Blue Ridge and plant a church here. This 'epiphany' took place on Old 76, not long before you cross the dam. I was not living here at the time, just visiting.

In both cases, it was as if a light had come on. In the first, I actually drew a little sun in my day planner on that day. I still have the book and sometime pull it out and look at it.

Maybe you have had similar moments in your life. Don't discount them.

I said earlier that mystics often use certain symbols to describe their experiences. We have looked at two common ones, height and light, let's turn now to a third, **hearing a voice**.

Well, this is exactly what happened to Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration. They got a message from on high. It was: Pay attention to Jesus. Hear Him. A message by the way that still holds for all of Jesus' followers.

What about you? Have you ever had a mystical experience? What was it like?

In all probability, it was *as if* you have been to the top of a mountain . . . *as if* a light had come on . . . *as if* you had heard a voice.

Regardless of the details, I challenge you take that experience down from the mantelpiece, dust it off and look at it afresh. Place it alongside the story we find in today's New Testament reading. Are there any similarities?

Allow God to use that experience to rekindle the flame of excitement for the Gospel in your life.

God does not just love and have a plan for the world *en masse*. He loves and has a plan for *you*, and that is why from time to time He leaves little post-it notes for us to find . . . little post-it note I have called mystical experiences.

Finally, and with this thought I wish to close:

When God reveals His glory, when He grants us a 'mystical experience', when God leaves us one of those little post-it, it is not for our sake alone.

It is certainly not so we can go around bragging that we have had some great spiritual experience and are therefore better and more spiritual than everyone else. No, that is not the way it works.

Glory revealed should translate into glory expressed.

Like Peter, James and John, we must bring that light down with us from the mountain and mirror it to others.

Jesus revealed *to me* should lead to Jesus revealed *in me*.

Is that happening in your life? In my life? Can people see Jesus' light in you and me?

If not, why not?

Resolve this morning to be not only to be a *light receiver*, but a *light bearer* .
.. a mystic on a mission!