

# From Cynicism to Enchantment

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[ 0 : 00 ] So today, we are continuing our sermon series that we began last week. It's a series that is fitted for the new year, a time when many of us are consciously or unconsciously taking stock of our lives and aspiring to newness in one area or another.

However, recalling the series Shift, starting or restarting a faith that can fully bloom, our hope is that for the next five weeks, we'll explore together some of the fundamental movements that are a part of a healthy faith, both individually and communally.

The point is not to add yet more things to your list of the sudden turns you need to make. Instead, we want to talk about shifts that are important but will necessarily happen gradually.

The shifts that have the potential to alter our faith in ways that are deeply and truly transformative but also are often the result of grace, just as much as they are the result of effort.

The result of what we can control as much a result of what we can't. In early December, I asked the preaching team to start thinking about the kind of shifts that they saw Israel and the early church making as they pursued a flourishing relationship with God.

[ 1 : 42 ] And as I extended the invitation, I've got to be honest that I had only a vague sense of what my own sermon might be about. But two experiences I want to share about in December settled into my heart and they really haven't let me go.

First was something I heard at a merger retreat that the elders held in December. As we gathered, we spent part of our time talking about the values of our community and brainstorming and we used several prompts to jumpstart our minds.

First, I'm drawn to a God who is. This church should feel. Bible stories that come to mind for us are.

The essential personality of this church is. As we were together, we scribbled down answer after answer to questions like these, freestyle writing, whatever came into our minds as a way to consider how God might be at work among us.

And one of those prompts and one of those answers settled in me. And it was this one. This church is for.

[ 3 : 04 ] Numerous, numerous, numerous answers to that question were given. This church is for the curious.

This church is for the weary. This church is for dreamers. This church is for the queer. Whether queer refers to your sexuality or gender or theology or relationship to faith.

This church is for those who genuinely want authentic connection with God and others. And more and more answers to that prompt came and we continue to write down things.

But then this one remark jumped out at me. This church is for the cynical optimists. And then just as those words have barely been written down, someone added an interesting, clarifying remark.

It's for the cynics who, if you scratch, just below the surface, are hopeless romantics. Now, while that characterization I know will not and does not need to rest well on everybody in this room, it is my suspicion that many of us fit the description.

[ 4 : 33 ] Then, a few weeks after that, I co-preached a Christmas Eve service with Pastor Anthony. And I had the amazing opportunity to tie together a story about the birth of Jesus with the famous letter, 1897, from Virginia O'Henlon, that most people associate with the words, Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.

I made the case, really briefly, that Christmas can point us back to enchantment. I shared how I was impressed with how in Luke 2, Mary both treasures what happens to her and ponders it.

She seems to hold the reality of Jesus dear, while also curiously continuing to question what it all might be.

Maybe, just maybe, she experienced for herself a bit of the hopeless romanticism, edged by a protective cynicism that some of us in this room might feel all too well.

Then, I encountered this book called Hunting Magic Seals, and it was over. I was like, I got to talk about enchantment. Enchantment is a shift I need to share. I want to talk about this more. It's a book by psychologist Richard Beck.

[ 6 : 02 ] I recommend it. It solidified my ideas. So what I want to recommend to us, and what I'll spend a little bit of time this evening talking to you about, is a shift toward enchantment.

Away from skepticism toward enchantment, which can lead to a faith in full bloom. And here's how Richard Beck, a psychologist, describes his experience.

This is a little bit of a longer quote, but I think it just is so spot on that I want to share it. Here's how he starts talking about this idea of enchantment. About seven years ago, my faith was at a very low ebb.

Waves of doubt had worn my faith down to the point where it was almost non-existent. After reading a lot of books, I eventually convinced myself that I couldn't read myself or think myself out of this gem.

In fact, I came to the conclusion that thinking and reading were a huge part of the problem. I had turned God into an intellectual puzzle to solve.

[ 7 : 18 ] The goal of faith became developing deep and sophisticated theological questions and opinions on an array of issues and controversies and questions. The problem of evil and suffering.

The violence we find in the Old Testament. The nature of the atonement. How to make science jive with the Bible. The moral witnessing of the Apostle Paul.

On the issues of gender roles and slavery. The nature of God's judgment in hell. The guiding principle of my faith during this season.

Was that a vibrant and healthy life involved tenaciously pursuing all these questions and getting some answers. Better answers and a better way of reading the Bible were the goals.

So for decades, my spiritual life consisted of reading and thinking hard about God and Scripture. Eventually though, and perhaps ironically, this pursuit slowly erode in my faith.

[ 8 : 22 ] I was, to put it plainly, too much in my head. The wheels wouldn't stop spinning. I couldn't pray because prayer was one of the things I had questions about.

I couldn't worship because I had too many theological disagreements with the lyrics of the songs we were singing. I walked away from sermon after sermon with long lists of questions and objections.

Over time, I cut myself off of God. Trapping myself in a prison of words and ideas. I was lost in a maze of questions and doubts.

Eventually, it dawned upon me. That this intellectual quest was making me spiritually sick. God wasn't a Rubik's Cube to solve. But a living reality to encounter.

Now, for some of us, Beck's description of his own journey might resonate deeply. We're unlearning and relearning when it comes to faith.

[ 9 : 29 ] We're engaging those big D words, deconstruction and decolonization, and we're doing some rebuilding. But even if you feel yourself on solid ground, you feel like you've gotten some of those answers to the questions that seem to dog other people.

Living in the age of science and reason can still have its disenchanting effects. We still may have little stomach for the unexplainable in faith.

For the encounter with God and not only the belief in God. We still may have little stomach for the romance of it.

We may only know how to bow to the Rubik's Cube God. The one who we are able to fit neatly into our calculations, which means neatly into our pockets.

Yeah, cynical optimists that we are. I also sometimes think that we feel a thinly disguised awe of people who hold a more enchanted faith.

[ 10 : 43 ] A faith in which God is very near. God is very present. The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, was one of those people. And here's how he frames what may seem just out of our grasp.

Life is this simple, Merton says. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and God is shining through it all the time.

This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true. If we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes and we may see it frequently.

God manifests himself everywhere in everything, in people and in things and in nature and in events. It becomes very obviously that he is everywhere and in everything and we cannot be without him.

You cannot be without God. It's impossible. It's simply impossible. The only thing is that we don't see it.

[ 11 : 49 ] For Thomas Merton, the one thing required to shift toward encountering God, rather than believing the right things about God, was a shift in perception.

And we're going to discover in our scripture for this evening, the only thing required for a shift in perception is an alteration of attention.

It's a change of focus. So let's take a few minutes to consider a story that's quite loved and well known in the Christian tradition.

And I think it sums up well this shift that I'm talking about. It's found in Exodus 3, 1 through 4. If you have a Bible or a phone, I think it will be up on the screen. Feel free to read along and follow along with me.

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. He led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

[ 12 : 56 ] There, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush. He looked and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

Then Moses said, I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why this bush is not burned up. When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, Moses, Moses.

And he said, here I am. The Moses, of whom this passage speaks, is a key figure in the story of Israel and of the early church.

Moses is remembered as the great liberator of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt under God's direction. His is a dramatic story of being raised as Egyptian royalty only to discover a call to confront the leader of Egypt with displays of power and demand to let his people go.

The passage I've just read is often discussed as a call story. It's this moment when Moses is called. Or sometimes it's discussed as this moment when God finally reveals God's name to God's people.

[ 14 : 23 ] And those are extremely important ways to think about the story. Yet I want to focus on this much simpler element of a story.

I want to consider Moses' quiet yet profound turning aside, shifting attention. In the story, Moses seems to be alone in the desert performing the work of a shepherd.

He is taking care of his father-in-law's sheep, making sure that they have food and water. He approaches a mountain, the very mountain from which God will later give the Ten Commandments.

But right now in this story, it's just a mountain, mostly. That is until Moses sees something. Perhaps out of the corner of his eye.

He sees a strange sight. He sees a fire burning inside a brittle, water-starved bush and yet not being consumed. It's burning, but not burning up.

[ 15 : 33 ] Even in a pre-scientific world, this defies the usual categories of experience. So in the middle of this daily task that allows Moses' family to have a livelihood, Moses goes to investigate.

One of the things that I find particularly interesting, too, in this story, is that Moses, and it depends on some translations make this clearer than others, but Moses thinks about turning aside before he actually turns aside.

We get this peek at his internal dialogue. There's a gap between his realization that something strange is happening and the moment in which he actually shifts his attention, leaving behind his work.

In that gap, Moses makes a difficult choice to make space for what is unthinkable. The romantic in him goes over to the bush, and as he does so, he shifts his attention.

He senses that he is being spoken to by God, that God is somehow present. And as he feels his name being called, he responds with an openness of heart, Here I am.

[ 16 : 50 ] In English, there aren't really words to capture the phrase, here I am, and the way it resonates in Hebrew. It carries the sense that Moses is making himself completely present and available to God, totally alert to whatever might happen next.

In 1901 and 1902, psychologist William James gave a series of lectures that became the basis of a classic work in the field of religion and psychology called the Varieties of Religious Experience.

In it, James describes religious experience as having four key characteristics. It cannot be easily put into words and mostly devised verbal explanation.

It is short-lived like water sifting through our fingers, something we feel but can't hold on to. Three, it is the result of grace.

In other words, we cannot make it happen. And finally, it seems to contain revelation, some truth that we never seem to fully know, at least fully know before.

[ 18 : 08 ] By that definition, Moses has a religious experience. He encounters God, and that encounter changes everything. It changes his life.

For most of us, it's really hard to think about God shining through the world at all times. And even if we believe it, it's really hard to remember it, to walk around in the world as if it's true.

And I know that there are people in this room who would take issue with the idea that God is active in the way that I'm suggesting. And I think that's okay. There's lots of room for debate here and discussion and conversation.

I don't have a lock on truth. But I do suspect that when the world becomes mostly a machine, when we feel ourselves capable of standing above it and objectively analyzing it, using only the laws of science, that something is lost.

that some understanding of ourselves and of God and of one another is lost.

[ 19 : 25 ] That a faith in which everything is neatly explained in words and rationally categorized doesn't fully feed the soul. And I just got to say, the idea that we might have something like a soul is a bit of enchantment.

It's knowledge that comes to us through a sense that we feel about ourselves rather than through objective fact. You can't find your soul or your heart in a body scan.

Yet the insight that we have a soul is an attempt to contain the feeling that we are our minds, but we are also more than our minds. We are our bodies, but we are also something more than our bodies.

That there is a something else that we can't quite explain. And that something else is only discerned through encounter with God.

And it's an encounter. It's an understanding that is deeply important. Because it is our feeling that there is something else to all of us that grounds our sense that every life is sacred.

[ 20 : 47 ] That every life has significance. That every human being has unique and incomprehensible worth. That's not a rational category.

That comes from a place of romance and encounter. So my point in saying all of this is that I think we need to shift. We need to think about what it means to turn aside, to train our attention.

I think we cynical optimists need to more fully embrace our hopeless romanticism. I think we need to recover our hearts.

But of course, shifting our attention to see that God shines through, it's hard. Moses sees this strange sight, this great sight.

But encountering God can only happen when we make space and pause during the days and during our weeks for what is not immediately understood.

[ 21 : 55 ] We have to learn not to write off what often seems impossible. I think it often happens when we pay attention to beauty. In the moments when we stop after, you know, seeing the sun strike a blade of grass in a particular way and we actually pause.

That's a kind of training. And I think that's the kind of thing that happens in art and often in nature and in music. And I particularly think music is critical in helping us reunite our heads and our hearts in worship spaces.

It's become kind of fashionable to dismiss. Maybe you've heard this. Worship music is Jesus is my boyfriend music. I did grow up with a lot of that music, okay? And there's definitely a lot to reimagine.

But I love this insight and had to sneak it in by James K.A. Smith about recovering music and how it helps us recover our heart and where the bias against this kind of music comes from.

Here's what he says. A focus on affectivity, love, or desire might be on occasion to somewhat re-evaluate our criticisms of mushy worship choruses that seem to confuse God with our boyfriend.

[ 23 : 21 ] Or we might be rightly critical of the self-centered grammar of such choruses. I don't think we should so quickly write off their romantic or even erotic elements. Song of Songs comes to mind in this context.

The quasi-rationalism that sneers at such erotic elements in worship and is concerned to keep worship safe from threats is the same rationalism that has consistently marginalized the religious experience of women and women mystics in particular.

And that's something to consider. The way that we pull apart head and heart and associate it with certain kinds of people and then marginalize it.

We can shift our attention by thinking about how we enchant time and space. Orthodox churches do this well. How can you decorate your world so that you more and more are turning aside to the God who is present?

When we talk about things like liturgical seasons, Lent and the season of Christmas and Advent, when we talk about ordering our day around rhythms of prayer, that's all a way of thinking about how to enchant time, how to train ourselves again to turn aside.

[ 24 : 57 ] All right. I could go on and on. There's so much more to say. I recommended a book that's inspired all this, Hunting Magic Ills. Check it out. But I just want to end by saying again, in this year and in the years to come, recover your heart if you haven't already.

There's this temptation to make our faith about morality, whether that's not stealing and not lying, or whether that's pursuing social justice.

There's still forms of morality, and they're both deeply important, all deeply good. We need it all. But they're not the entire story. becoming united with Christ is.

The final thing that I'll leave you with that astonishes me in Exodus 2 is that Moses' shift in attention is grounded in the reality that God shifts God's attention toward us.

The God Moses encounters hears the pain of their people, is concerned and comes down. This is a God who has a heart.

[ 26 : 18 ] And that heart is expressed in Jesus. Our prayer for us is that we would live more enchanted lives as we pursue union with Christ.

That we would be those who turn aside to make space for the strange sights that uniquely fuel the life of faith. And that we would deeply become, again, hopeless romantics inside a love affair that year after year leaves us speechless.

Amen.