

**THEOPANIES**  
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**Isaiah 6: 1 – 8**  
**February 7, 2010**

Have you ever had an experience like Isaiah describes? When you felt yourself lifted above the nitty-gritty, usual stuff of your days into something greater, more than, transcendent, holy.

“And the seraph angels called to one another, saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord. The whole earth is full of God’s glory.’”

Have you had a mystical experience like that? When you felt connected to something mysterious and radically Other.

I’m betting you have. Maybe not as dramatic as Isaiah’s, but times when something happened that was so unexpected and beyond explanation that you had a lump of wonder in your throat.

Maybe it was a morning even last week. You stepped outside into the first light and there was that new day smell. From somewhere a bird was singing. And you had this powerful sense of the giftedness and miracle of it all – the day, creation, your own life.

Sure, the day ahead was going to be filled with daily things, some ordinary and mundane, some unpleasant, even hard. But in that morning moment, you had a spiritual knowing that life also has this deeper than, greater than, miraculous dimension, which cannot be explained. You can only stand there and soak it in.

Yep, I think we all have mystical moments like that. Theophanies is the theological word for them – moments when a sacredness shines through the ordinary, and the world is just wondrous. And if someone in that moment asked you where God is, you’d say: “Oh, just look around.”

The Hindu poet, Tagore, describes such a mystical moment this way: “I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had lifted from my sight and the ultimate significance of all things was laid bare. I found the world bathed in wonderful radiance and no person or thing seemed trivial or unpleasing.”

My hunch is you have had such theophanies of God’s holy presence.

For a sense of mystery is where religion starts. I mean, religious faith isn’t really about believing the right things or claiming a certain doctrine. Rather, religion starts with and is really about experiencing a Living Mystery in the very midst of everyday life, when ordinary things become anything but ordinary.

An altar candle, a piece of communion bread, the touch of a friend’s hand on your shoulder, a thinking-of-you note in the midst of a hard time from someone unexpected, the sound of someone saying the Lord’s Prayer behind you in church, even a stranger’s smile – ordinary things that happen and feel like God’s fingerprints are all over them.

But we’ve come to believe that only saints and the extraordinarily religious have mystical experiences. Or that mystical experiences only happen on religious retreats or pilgrimages. And sometimes retreats and pilgrimages are necessary to help open our eyes wider.

But maybe you can also take a deep breath and look around and expect the daily-ness of God.

Like when a stranger holds the door for you at the coffee place. You say, “Thank you,” as you make eye contact. And in some curious way, there is a connection – this sense that the one holding the door for you is in a deeper way your brother, who shares with you all the beauty and pain and love that is life. And this unexpected momentary connection feels holy somehow, as if it is a mystical daily reminder of God’s relational, in the midst of life, Being.

Or maybe it was a medical challenge. “I can’t face this,” you thought. “I can’t do this. I don’t have strength enough for this.”

And then somehow the fear just gave way to acceptance, an okayness, even serenity. You found inner strength you didn’t know you had. Where did it come from? You found yourself being, “borne up on eagle’s wings.” How did that happen?

The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, facing execution by the Nazis, called it the experience of the “Beyond in our midst.” When did you last experience the Beyond in the midst of your life?

Maybe you have carried some deep guilt or shame for years. You made a serious mistake which hurt people. Or you didn’t act when you should have done something. Or maybe it was just growing up feeling like you were never adequate – that no matter what you did or how hard you tried, you were always just short of the expected. For the world has ten-thousand ways of reminding us that we’re not quite good enough.

And then one day you are walking in the rain. And instead of hurrying for a dry place, you just allow the rain to wash your face. Only it feels like more, like a kind of baptism, as if the shame and years of felt inadequacy are just being washed away by some Great Power of Love.

And you can’t explain what it is about the rain, or this feeling of being washed and released. But when you hear Isaiah’s words about an angel touching his lips with God’s grace, you find yourself whispering, “Yes.”

Though we live in a culture shaped by science and technology, in which something has to be rational, quantifiable, three-dimensional, and factual in order to be true. And so it’s hard to make these mystical experiences fit. Yet, haven’t you experienced a lot in life that defies logical explanation? Haven’t you again and again had to say about things in your own life? – “It’s a mystery.”

Maybe then, life is only partly about finding answers. Maybe life is also about living into the mystery....

So maybe, it’s been a particularly hard time for you. Nothing lately has gone well. Everything feels out of sync. There’s this sense of being depleted, barren, adrift, alone. “Is this all there is?” you find yourself asking wide-eyed in the night.

Then in the night, mysteriously, gracefully, comes this sense of being held up by Some Presence, a Greater Power of Love. And behind the randomness that seemed to rule your life, you suddenly see a deeper pattern. Your life, even the hard parts, fits in a Greater Scheme.

And maybe as you laid there in the night the words of the ancient mystic, Theresa of Avilla, circled in you head: “All is well. And all is well. And all will be well.”

These kinds of mystical experiences happen – don’t they? The mystery of God’s Being breaks through again and again. In even the most ordinary parts of our lives there are theophanies.

On the backside of your bulletin are the words of the poet, William Blake:

“To see a World in a grain of sand,

And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand.  
And Eternity in an hour.”

Welcome, then, all of you...to the life of a mystic.