

THE HUMAN AND THE HOLY  
(Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36)

It's been ten years since I went to Jerusalem, and a lot has changed in that decade. Tourism to Israel peaked in 2000, the year of the new Millennium. But that was also the year of the Al Aqsa Intifada, which put a real damper on visitors. Ten years ago, it was pretty easy to go into the West Bank. Today the Israeli security fence separates the West Bank from Israel proper.

Despite the problems, pilgrims still go to Jerusalem. They go because they want to see places where Jesus preached and performed his miracles; they want to stand on the stones where stood and walk the streets that he walked. The Tantur Institute, where I stayed while I was in Jerusalem, had a rather disparaging label for the typical ten-day pilgrim visit to the Holy Land: they called them "run where Jesus walked" tours because the pilgrims were constantly dashing from one holy site to another.

Jerusalem is a special place, a place where pilgrims feel closer to Jesus. Going there can be a life-changing experience. But some pilgrims get more than bargain for. Some of them come down with what's known as Jerusalem Syndrome.

There are three versions of this malady:

- Some who get it are mentally ill to begin with. They come to Jerusalem with psychotic ideas, and being there makes their condition worse
- Some are members of fringe religious group groups obsessed with the importance of Jerusalem.
- And some are people with no history of mental illness who become psychotic after they get to Jerusalem

In a typical year there are around fifty cases in that last category. And just in case you're thinking of visiting Jerusalem, I have to warn you, 97% of the people who come down with Jerusalem Syndrome are Protestants.

The syndrome follows a distinct, predictable clinical pattern. It begins with general anxiety, followed by a compulsive need to visit holy places all alone. Next, sufferers become obsessed with cleanliness. Then they help themselves to a sheet from the hotel and fashion it into a robe. Finally, they begin shouting Bible verses as they march through Jerusalem to some holy place where they preach a rambling sermon calling on humanity to adopt a more wholesome, moral, simple way of life.

Israeli psychiatrists know all about Jerusalem Syndrome. The treatment protocol includes tranquilizers and anti-psychotic drugs in the most severe cases. The symptoms usually go away after five days or a week. If the person doesn't have insurance, the Israeli government pays for psychiatric treatment and for an escort to accompany the sufferer back to his or her home country.

Nobody knows for sure just what causes Jerusalem Syndrome. But there's no doubt that a visit to Jerusalem can change a person's life, even if only for a few days and in ways no one would ever want.

I say all this because it strikes me as somehow odd that people visiting Jerusalem 2000 years after Jesus can have such a profound experience while the disciples who saw Jesus in all his glory were oblivious to what they saw and too obtuse to get it. Something incredible happens to Peter and James and John – they see Jesus transfigured, they see Moses and Elijah – and they can barely keep their eyes open and stay awake. They are terrified by God's voice from the cloud. But it doesn't seem to make much difference. They come back down the mountain and right away go back to their old ways and old habits

In other words, their time on the mountaintop doesn't really change them. They come back down the mountain in a holy fog, shaking their heads and wondering, "What was that all about?" It doesn't take them any time at all to slide back into the familiar old rut.

Celtic spirituality speaks of something called "thin places." A thin place is a place – an actual location – where the veil between this world and the "other world" or the "eternal world" is so sheer that it's easy to slip through – a kind of permeable membrane. A thin place is a cracked door between this world and some other brighter place where God is found.

Thin places aren't just found in Celtic spirituality, though. Mount Sinai where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments is a thin place. Jerusalem is a thin place. Mecca is a thin place for Muslims. The Black Hills of South Dakota are a thin place for the Lakota. The mountain where Jesus was transfigured was a thin place.

Pilgrims travel to thin places because they want to experience God, because they're hoping to find something that's missing in their day-to-day lives, because they're longing for something that's really real.

I confess that I don't quite know what to make of the idea of thin places, any more than I do with the story of Jesus' transfiguration. Are some places truly more holy than others? Are we more likely to find God in Jerusalem than in East Podunk?

If I had to guess, I'd say it probably has more to do with our attitude than with the location itself. If we go to a place expecting to encounter the divine, we're a lot more likely to have that encounter than if we go simply to see the sights. That's the basic difference between a pilgrim and a tourist.

We have to be careful not to draw too bright a line between holy places and the ordinary, humdrum places where we spend most of our time. "Well, I'm here in dreary old Andover. God's not going to show up here. If only I could go to Jerusalem or Rome or wherever, then things would be different."

Long ago in the medieval village of Cracow, there lived a poor, pious rabbi named Eisik. One night Eisik had a dream, which told him to make a journey to Prague, many hard miles away. There, beneath the bridge that led to the royal castle, he would find a treasure trove of gold. At first Eisik ignored the dream. But it happened the next night and the one after that. So finally he decided he had better heed the dream and make the journey. When he got to Prague, he

found the bridge guarded by soldiers. He felt thwarted and prowled up and down the riverbank until he was stopped by a captain of the guard who asked if he had lost something. No, Eisik, said, he had come a long way to find something. Then he told the captain about his dream. "Gold!" the captain laughed, "What reasonable man takes dreams seriously? Just a couple of nights ago I had a dream that told me to go to Cracow and find a rabbi named Eisik. It told me that if I looked in recess behind his stove, I would find a golden treasure." The captain warned Eisik not to be so gullible. But Eisik hurried home, and when he got there, searched behind his stove, where he found the treasure that ended his poverty.

The treasure is never far away. It's close at hand. All we have to do is wake up to its presence. We don't have to make a hard journey to a holy place far away. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that there was a time when people didn't limit their expectations of a divine encounter to places like churches or temples or holy mountains, because "the divine could erupt anywhere, and when it did, they marked the spot in any way they could, although there was no sense hanging around for long, since God stayed on the move."

So where do we look for God? Where do we have an up close and personal experience of the divine? Maybe in some holy place. But maybe in some place that's downright mundane and ordinary: in nature, in friends, in family, in the cry of a new baby, in the gentle hug of a friend.

And when it happened, how do we respond? Do we simply walk back down the mountain and go back to our old ways and selfish habits? Or do our faces shine with the glory of God?

We can read dozens of books on spirituality, we can come to church every Sunday, we can spend a bundle to go to the Holy Land and walk where Jesus walked. But it's all wasted effort unless we let God penetrate the muck and shine in our lives. All our searching for God is pointless unless it produces something new in us, unless it changes us

We're coming up on Lent, which is traditionally a time of searching, of drawing closer to God and Christ, of pondering our true identity as disciples. May our encounters with Christ, wherever they may occur, cause his light to shine in us and in our lives, so that we are not only transfigured but transformed.