

“A Master of Divinity?”

by Brent Parker

Practicing Holy Hindsight through the Awareness Examen

In December of 2007, upon completion of my studies and satisfying the scholastic requirements of my degree program, I will have accomplished a Masters of Divinity. Though I look forward to that day with great anticipation, I'm a bit uncomfortable with the expectations that the church and her people might develop if the title of this degree is confused with a literal expectation that I'll have mastered the divine.

Anyone who has attended, completed, or considered seminary, well knows how the adventure of theological studies often leaves us with many more questions than answers. Yet, we who have studied the vast expanse of theologies and theologians, doctrines and heresies, and have constructed what is for us a working knowledge of God, continue to fear that our students will find out that we, too, have not figured out the mysteries of the divine.

Because you work with young people, it's fairly safe to assume that you, too, have found yourself sitting in a classroom (probably in a circle) trying to get the point of your Sunday school lesson across when that young teen asks, “Did Noah really live inside of a whale?” After you remind the student that it was Jonah who was swallowed by the big fish and

Noah who built the ark, you find yourself formulating an answer that won't lead the conversation too far away from the intended teaching that we should always do what God wants.

We tiptoe around our own wonderings because we know from experience that the curious young minds in the room have already been asking themselves how Daniel didn't get eaten by the lions and how that little boy gave Jesus a small basket of fish and bread and watched as it fed 5,000 people.

The Mystery of Divinity

The problem is that since the very beginning of time, no one has been able to fully wrap his or her mind on God. In fact, how time began continues to be one of the greatest mysteries of all. Even using our very best intentions, any adjective, adverb, name, trait, or descriptive term fails to completely conceptualize the infinitude of God. It should come as no surprise to those who seek to make finite the infinite that there's incredible difficulty squeezing all of God into the boxes we construct. Christians have commonly referred to this limited knowledge as *Finitum non capax infiniti*, or “the finite is not capable of the infinite.”

Our students, though, continue to ask the questions that we've been conditioned to stay away from because of our own inability to answer them. We

worry that somehow a lack of simple, understandable answers might tip off our students that we don't know everything there is to know about God. Yet, deep in the recesses of my own mind, I try to make sense of the miraculous acts of waters being parted, staffs turning into snakes, and men standing in fiery furnaces unscathed.

In the spirit of good theological investigation and source criticism, I'm willing to consider an understanding that the Hebrew Scriptures were often symbolic stories, parables even, used to illustrate rather than to provide historical facts. Even still, if I'm to faithfully engage the New Testament accounts of Jesus I find an unsettled spirit as I try to explain the unexplainable.

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The simple statement that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine leads the Christian into an understanding of God that is still quite mysterious. When was the last time we looked back over the life

of Christ with an honest inquiry? I ask this question not to elicit doubt or mistrust of our Christian tradition—but because our students are asking it every time we make a propositional statement about Jesus being born of a virgin, raising people from the dead, walking on water, dying on a cross for our sins and then being raised from the dead, and eventually ascending into the heavens.

When we dip a new believer into the baptismal waters, declaring that our old self is buried and then raised to new life with Christ, or when we stand at the communion table and pronounce that the bread is Christ's body and the cup is his blood—we invite our students into a mysterious encounter with the Holy.

In our Sunday morning lessons and sermons we open ourselves up to these questions—when we dip a new believer into the baptismal waters, declaring that our old self is buried and then raised to new life with Christ, or when we stand at the communion table and pronounce that the bread is Christ's body and the cup is his blood—we invite our students into a mysterious encounter with the Holy.

Holy Hindsight—the Awareness Examen

While it seems clear to me that mystery will always be a component of the Christian faith, I suggest that we're of little use to our students if we are unable to

say something definitive about our own experience of God. Though I'm not a member of the United Methodist church, John Wesley's quadrilateral has been a wonderful guide by which I can make sense of faith. While holding that Scripture is central, he invites the Christian to consider how the tradition of the Church, reason, and a person's experience of God helps to inform a well-rounded understanding of God. The roles of Scripture, tradition, and reason are extremely important, yet I'd suggest that one of the greatest assets we have in ministering to and with young people is the experience of God we can help them to remember and to articulate.

Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn have written a wonderful resource that has helped me recognize the mysterious

God in a very real way. *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* is a short instructive book that introduces an ancient Ignatian form of prayer called the Awareness Examen. In this book, we're invited to consider the two basic questions: "For what am I most grateful?" and "For what am I least grateful?" I've slightly altered the questions and have begun, as part of my own attentiveness to God's presence, to ask myself and to encourage young people to consider, "Where have I been most aware of God's presence?" and "Where have I been least aware of God's presence?" in that given day or experience.

Though we're still relying on our own limited under-

standings of God, this act of slowing down to look in hindsight at our experiences is one of the most helpful processes by which I'm able to recognize the presence of this mysterious God in my life. While I maintain that a full understanding of God is impossible, helping our students to look back over specific periods of their faith journeys is sure to uncover clearer remembrances of God's activity in their lives. Ultimately, aren't we more interested in helping our young friends to find God in the midst of the day to day than we are in making sure that they can explain the intricate details of the Trinity or the Incarnation?

I invite you to try this prayer for yourself. Find a quiet place where you can be alone and rest in God's presence. Light a candle or play a soft piece of music to help you still your mind. Ask God to go with you over the day, helping you to be attentive to those moments when you were most fully aware of God's presence. Pay attention to the faces of people that you encountered, the activities that you shared in, and the emotions that you felt. Where did you experience God in a real way? Where have you felt an absence of God's presence this day? Thank God, in your own way, for accompanying you through this prayer time.

Imagine if you were to pay attention to God in this way each day. How might the mysteries of a transcendent being become assuredness in the day to day recognition of the immanent? How might we begin to walk with our young people in ways that empower them to point out the presence of God? Youth ministries that are grounded in experiencing the truth of God invite meaningful and authentic conversations. These conversations are likely to

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create environments where fear of not knowing all of the right answers might be replaced by genuine discussions celebrating the wonderfully mysterious ways that God has shown up in the mundane movements of each day.

Hope for the Future

Young people today are looking for adults who are wide-eyed about the life they're living. Your students hope that growing old doesn't mean growing numb to the real presence of God. Even with books that attempt to make a case for Christ, for the Creator, and for faith, our best case for helping youth to develop confidence in God comes through helping them to recognize God at work today. After we return home from that weekend retreat or summer camp experience where participants recognized that God was all around, young people long for adults who will keep them attuned to the mysterious God that dwells within and among them. The highs of faith come crashing down when there are no companions to help them remain aware of the way God is breaking into their lives. The loud world they live in can deafen the gentle voice of God.

Interestingly enough, if we're faithful in our efforts to accompany our young friends through the journey of faith, while also allowing them to walk with us in

our own journeys, we may find that the mystery of God is, in fact, the one thing we also yearn for the most. It will also become the thing we can most depend on. Besides, aren't we ultimately trying to nurture a greater dependence upon God in ourselves as well as our students? And if our questions go unanswered or our answers fail to satisfy the inquiries, we manage to find ourselves on a journey that is filled with dangerous wonder.

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Frederick Buechner, in *The Alphabet of Grace*, offers a beautiful insight into this Christian journey:

Religion as a word points essentially, I think, to that area of human experience where in one way or another man happens upon mystery as a summons to pilgrimage, a come-all-ye; where he is led to suspect the reality of splendors that he cannot name; ...where in great laughter perhaps and certain silences he glimpses a destination that he can never know fully until he reaches it. ☛

Note: Be sure to check out Brent Parker's other article, "An Unsolved Theodicy: Finding God in the Toughest Times," in the July/August 2006 "Mystery" issue of *The Journal of Student Ministries*.



Brent Parker is the founder of This Way Ministries (www.thiswayministries.org), an effort to accompany congregations in the formation of life-giving youth ministries. He has served the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as a local youth minister and camp and conference director. He is also a featured speaker and worship leader for Disciples of Christ, United Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. Brent, Kori, and their sons, Caedmon and Kai, call Fort Worth, Texas, home and enjoy spending days together at the park, the zoo, and at TCU sporting events.

