

Unit 2 Introduction

Encountering Jesus: An Invitation to Transformation

I have been extremely blessed to grow up in a family with long roots in Christianity. While very few in my family have been pastors, they have been faithful and opinionated laity. I loved going to Sunday school with our amazing and technologically advanced flannel boards (yes, I am that old). I loved stories of the Old Testament: Noah, Sarah and Abraham, Elijah and Elisha, and David. But I really loved the stories of Jesus. I loved the stories of healing the blind, the leprous, and lame. I loved the stories of feeding the 5,000 and how all people were drawn to Him, especially those who had been cast into the shadows of empire. What was it about Jesus that people were drawn to Him?

My love of Jesus began by being loved deeply and well by people who also loved Jesus. I was extremely blessed to have a strong Christian family, parents and grandparents, but then also be part of wonderful loving and caring churches. Outside of my family, I have had pastoral couples who absolutely loved me with the love of God. Therefore, believing in Jesus' love for me was easy. So many loved me well and those persons introduced me to the love of Jesus. Let me also say as a former youth pastor, I have also heard from teens how hard it was to believe in God and that God loved them because others who had said they believed in God had been very unloving to them.

Within the love I felt from God through others, I can also speak of hundreds of times where I experienced personally the love of God. I can remember as a young child coming to the altar on a Sunday night service and just sensing the overwhelming love of God. I can remember another time when I was 12 and my family was moving to a new city far away and I was having to say good bye to the only life I knew. Right before we moved, I went on a 3-day bike and camping trip with all my friends. As they were talking about future plans I could feel a hole of despair growing in my soul. I found myself on a path where I was by myself. I found myself humming hymns and then had an overwhelming sense of God's presence letting me know it would be ok. I was not alone. God understood my fears and pain, and promised to be very present, and God was.

As a professor and pastor I can't explain or exhaust the beautiful mysteries of how encounters with Jesus occur and why they are so powerful and bountiful for some people and so anemic and scarce for others. When I was a youth pastor I once had a young teen girl who grew up in a loving Christian home simply confess that she could not feel God's presence. From everything I could observe this was not the result of any rebelliousness on her part. It was also not

the case that she was indifferent or apathetic, she really wanted to experience and encounter God. As a young youth pastor, I am not sure I gave her the best advice, but I simply told her to keep seeking after God and not seeking a certain experience or feeling but just have faith that God is not far away. It was about 4-5 months later she shared that she could sense God's presence in a powerful way, but that time of God's silence had strengthened and matured her. I would not want to build too much of a universal theology out of her story, but it was her journey and story that impacted me, and in all cases, it is often messy and unpredictable.

As I have reflected on my own spiritual formation journey as a pastor and professor there are some lessons God has taught me along the way about transforming encounters with Jesus.

The danger of emotional manipulation: As a teenager I experienced, and as a youth intern I participated in, spiritual manipulation. I did not know it at the time and in most cases I am convinced the leaders were not knowingly spiritually abusive. Regardless, with theological reflection and growing pastoral wisdom, I have become very attune to situations where leaders either with intention or naiveté are trying to manufacture an encounter with God. While I am very passionate and very expressive, there is great danger and cautionary discernment must be employed as we lead people. One of the side effects of Christian cultures that are emotionally manipulative is that people often crave an emotional experience more than an authentic transforming encounter with Jesus. (This is not to say that authentic encounters with Jesus cannot be emotional.) As a young child I encountered this abuse through preaching that was heavily influenced by fear, power, and intimidation. In recent days I have seen this in times of musical singing that emphasized moods, tempos, and atmospheres that centered on the experience of the moment more than a transforming encounter. This also can shape persons into thinking worship is only "good" if they have a certain type of emotional experience. Again, let me be clear that authentic encounters with God can be emotional. However, as I have grown older, I can only say that you will know if it is from God by the fruit of transformation it produces. And yet there is one more caveat. I have also seen God authentically transform people even in manipulative spaces. When we lead in singing and preaching let us focus on God's glory and allow the encounter to come as God desires.

God invites, but does not coerce and never gives up on you: As a Wesleyan I am firmly convinced God does not coerce people but invites and woos their transformation. Story after story

in the Scriptures Jesus encounters people and asks them, "What do you want me to do for you?" Like a loving parent who desperately wants to see their child flourish in life and joy, God's presence invites encounters of transformation, confessing and repenting. Even as God empowers our response to God's loving overtures, God will never force the transformation to occur. God will never stop pursuing you. You can never engage in behavior that will cause God to stop loving and seeking your restoration. God is seeking all who are lost, and when we encounter God He invites us to transformation.

Encountering God in nature: While I am not a rugged outdoorsman, I love being in nature. I love the swimming in the ocean. I love skiing in the mountains. I love hiking to waterfalls and kayaking rivers. While there is always a distinction between the Creator and creation, God has met me in in all these places. I can recall many times snow skiing or watching a sunset on the beach where I have encountered the transforming presence of God. In these places, I could feel God inviting me to feel the warmth of God's love in the beauty of God's creation.

Encountering God in sacred sanctuaries: One of the great places to encounter God is in communal worship. While I love to worship God in nature, there is something powerful about sacred spaces. I have had the privilege to worship in some of the most amazing cathedrals in the world. Notre-Dame and Sacré Coeur in Paris and St. Paul's in London are some of my favorite. To enter those sacred spaces immediately yields an encounter with the holy. Yet I have also encountered God under a torn tarp tied between two trees on a hot dusty plot of land in the Dominican Republic. When God's people gather for worship God promises to be present. The question becomes are we fully present to God and offering ourselves to God to be further healed and transformed from sin to love.

Encountering God in the sacraments: As part of communal worship I have also encountered God powerfully in the celebrations of baptism and the Lord's Supper. As Wesleyans, we celebrate that the sacraments are unique means of grace where we encounter God and God invites us to find salvation in our being

incorporated into the church in baptism and being nourished at the Lord's Supper.

Encountering God in prayer: I can recount many times either in communal worship or prayer nights where God showed up in powerful ways as we prayed. In those times there was places for both pouring out our requests and intercessions, as well as listening to hear God speak. Prayer is not simply a place to inform God, but a place to encounter God. While I love praying together with other people, I also love praying in places of solitude. I love to pray as I am riding to work on my scooter. I love to pray as I am running. In these times of prayer, I can sense God inviting me to trust and focus on God. These times of prayer do not provide guarantees that we always get what we want when we want it. But there is an assurance that God is present in our worship of praise and lament.

Encountering God in and through people: I have been powerfully encountered by God through people. I have been challenged, praised, rebuked, and encouraged by God through many people. I have a few people specifically that have been a consistent voice and presence of God in my life and I am thankful.

Encountering Jesus: Imagine Jesus looking at you. What do you see? What do you feel? What is the invitation? To be encountered by the crucified and resurrected Christ is an invitation to be transformed. This is not an experience to be manipulated or controlled. This is not even an experience only for yourself. This is an invitation to be transformed as part of God's healing and renewal of all things. Encountering Jesus does not promise life will always be easy and go how we would like. But these encounters remind us we are not alone. God is on the loose in the world. Are we seeking and looking for God? Not simply for a momentary viral experience, but a life of transformation.

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