

I have seen the sun break through  
to illumine a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl  
of great price, the one field that had  
the treasure in it. I realize now  
that I must give all that I have  
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

This poem by R. S. Thomas, an Anglican priest in a rural Welsh parish until his death in September of 2000, describes the kind of experience I suspect we can recognize. Epiphanies happen, moments when we see life and self and others and all creation in a brighter light, moments we soon forget.

The stories of Isaiah and Peter share remarkable similarities. Both Isaiah and Peter are doing what they have done hundreds of times: Isaiah is in the Temple performing the prescribed rituals he learned as a young man, rituals that have become rote from repetition; Peter is cleaning nets as he has done since he was twelve, work that no longer requires thought, allowing him to dream of a different life.

Epiphanies happen in the midst of everyday life and work. The sun breaks through and reveals what has been true all along but not known, consciously: the infinite qualitative difference or infinite difference in quality between the Holy and the human (Soren Kierkegaard).

This awareness of an infinite difference in quality creates a new self-consciousness. “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips . . .” exclaims Isaiah. “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” cries Peter.

“Sinner” is how Isaiah and Peter describe themselves. No voice from the Holy of Holies booms out, “Isaiah, you wretch, how dare you presume to speak of the Holy!” What Peter calls sin, Jesus names fear. How we experience the infinite difference in quality between God and us, and how God names this difference is different.

Isaiah and Peter experience the infinite qualitative difference as judgement. Isaiah thought he was going to die, because everything he knew from his tradition told him you cannot see God and live. Yet, there he stands in the Holy of Holies, beholding God, feeling extraordinarily vulnerable.

What Peter can only interpret as a manifestation of divine intervention in his life makes him terribly self-conscious. He remembers the fight he had with his wife last night. His sons do not want to take over the business; a growing emotional distance from his adolescent daughters troubles him; another bad day of fishing will only increase his economic insecurities. A miraculous catch cast a bright light on his life and what Peter sees frightens him. Peter wants Jesus to go away.

What Peter wants is beside the point. What God wants is the point! From God's side, the infinite qualitative difference is not cause for condemnation. What God says to Isaiah, what Jesus says to Peter is, "I have a job for you to do."

A typical feature of call stories reported in the Bible is resistance: "Woe, not me. I am not up to the task!" When God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, commissioning him to go to Pharaoh, Moses responds "Who am I to liberate your people from Egypt?"

God persists. Moses protests. The Israelites do not trust me, do not listen to me, do not believe You appeared to me. God teaches Moses some magic to grab their attention. Moses claims he stutters when speaking in public. "The wrath of the Lord flared up against Moses," so the story goes and God appoints Aaron to speak for him.

Whatever it takes—magic tricks, speech therapy, hot coals to the lips, a miraculous catch of fish—when God calls the only answer is, "Here am I, send me." Just ask Jonah. Which may be the only reason we need to go our own way when we see the sun break through to illumine a small field. It is much *safer* to pretend life is a hurrying on to a receding future, a hankering after an imagined past, then to respond to the call of God.

Jesus' response to Peter's self-rejection, to his desire for distance from the holy is, "Do not be afraid." Fear is the condition of unfreedom. Fear makes slavery appear agreeable. *When we fear losing our security, our comforts, our lives, more than we love freedom we become manageable and life loses its glory.*

Sergei Ovsianikov was sent to prison during his army service, accused of "propaganda for the American way of life" and "disobedience to superiors." He said he knew nothing about the American way of life, while "disobedience" was a widespread phenomenon.

His superiors believed he would return from prison as "a normal Soviet soldier," meaning he would stop discussing unsuitable questions with other soldiers.

Sergei shared his questions about freedom with his cellmates. One reported him to prison superiors and he was transferred to solitary confinement. Fear began to steal up on him slowly.

After a period of torment and despair, something happened. The event did not belong to the reality of his locked cell; it had nothing to do with the heavy oil paint of its blue walls, or with the heavy iron door with its little peephole, the heavy smell of waste. It was as if reality divided, and he wound up in the part where there was light and lightness. Heaviness disappeared.

And in this light he heard very clearly the words: *Freedom can only be found in God*. The main problem lay in the fact that “God” was not a word in his vocabulary. He never used it. If he knew anything about God, it was most likely the simple truth of that time: that God does not exist.

Before he had time to think through all the logical consequences of the phrase he heard, joy came over him. It was such a bright joy, such a feeling of lightness. He understood nothing and no longer wanted to understand. He simply wanted to be in that absolutely new feeling and stand under the rays of joy, as under a shower of the sun’s rays.

Later, a great many new questions appeared, the main one being: Do I know anything about God? If I were indeed to recognize “freedom can only be in God,” I had to begin with the fact that I knew nothing about God. Sergei’s epiphany led to his vocation as a Russian Orthodox priest serving in Holland until his death in 2018.

Epiphanies happen. We can forget them and hurry on to a receding future or hanker after an imagined past. Or, we can turn aside for a while until we realize the pearl of great price is buried here. To give everything we have to possess it, is to know joy and the freedom from fear found only in God.