

## The Note Inside Your Coat

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Luke 9:28-45

The history of scientific and mathematical research is populated by the names of hundreds and hundreds of brilliant people not the least of which was a seventeenth century French physicist and mathematician named Blaise Pascal. We have Blaise Pascal to thank for the early invention of the calculator, time tested theories around the fluctuations of barometric pressures and some of the foundational theorems behind the principles of probability. And if you think I understand anything about any of these subjects you would be sorely misled. Toward the end of his short life – he died at the age of 39 – Pascal turned his brilliant mind toward the considerations of philosophy and religion. His writings on these subjects are considered classics even today. Included in these is the philosophical argument known as Pascal's wager which posits that all human beings bet their lives on whether God exists or whether God does not exist. Pascal posed that the rational bet in this regard is to believe and live as if God existed. If God exists the payoff is infinite, if God doesn't exist what did it matter anyway. All in all, Pascal is a compelling figure in the history of human intellectual development.

After Pascal died while collecting all of his clothing his housekeeper noticed that there was stitching inside his coat – as if something has been sewed inside the lining. So the housekeeper undid the stitching and found a piece of paper. And on the paper was Pascal's writing and it began with these words describing evidently a spiritual experience:

The year of grace 1654,

Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement pope and martyr, and others in the martyrology. Vigil of St. Chrysogonus, martyr, and others. From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight,

FIRE.

Pascal continues:

GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob not of the philosophers and of the learned.

Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.

Now it is not left to us to try to understand or explain what happened to Pascal that night of November 23rd, 1654. His only word to describe it is, Fire. Suffice it to say that it was an encounter with the living God that likely not only altered the course of his life – but was so seminal that his account of it he sewed into his coat as if sewing it into his soul. For no one else to know or to see other than him.

From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight – FIRE.

The note inside your coat.

The history of humankind among many things is a history of our encounter with the transcendent. In Judeo-Christian terms we call this theophany – which in the Greek means – the appearance of God. Theophany is the moment – that deeply personal and spiritual moment when a person encounters in some mystical way the reality of God. It is a moment that can barely be described and is seldom understood by anybody else. It can happen standing on the beach watching the sunset, or staring into a dark night of infinite stars, or watching your baby takes its first breath, or sitting in a sanctuary listening to sacred music, or waiting for news of a loved-one's surgery. For the disciples it happened locked up in a room and a sound as of the rush of a mighty wind descended upon them. It is this unexpected moment when God appears and we are convinced of God's presence – of God's existence. Usually it is not some supernatural pyrotechnic moment that Hollywood might try to capture on screen – more often it happens to the likes of you and me quietly and gently. For me one of my theophanies came at the age of 10 listening to my grandfather pray a Christmas prayer. Don't ask me to explain it – just take my word that in that old man's prayer God was as real for me in that moment as the marble of this pulpit is to me now.

If we had the time we would take the next several minutes and have each of us search our own personal

“The most real use of your time is the time you give to someone else.”

histories for those moments when God became real for us – instead we will leave that for homework. Because the truth is – not only have we likely had those moment, but like Pascal we have sewn them into our coats – woven them into our souls. We are who we are in part because of the encounter we've had with God.

Victor Frankl – holocaust survivor and author of *Man's Search for Meaning* recounted that just prior to his detainment and transfer to Auschwitz he took the magnum opus of his life – his doctoral dissertation and sewed it into the lining of his coat – his best chance, he thought, of holding onto his life's work. As soon as he arrived at the camp they, of course, took his coat and with it his life. Shortly afterward he was given the coat of another prisoner. He put it on and reached into the pocket and found a scrap of paper and on it were the words of the Shema Israel – the most sacred of Jewish prayers – Hear O Israel the Lord your God is One and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Frankl said at that moment God was real. And the moment remained stitched if not inside his coat, inside his soul.

Each of us has a theophany stitched inside our souls.

Luke does his best – along with Matthew and Mark – to describe for us the encounter that Peter, James and John have with Jesus on top of the mountain. The truth is it is an experience I'm not sure that any of us is supposed to understand. The changing face of Jesus, dazzling white clothing, apparitions of prophets past, clouds descending, voices speaking – it's all a little too much – a lot too much – for us to begin to understand. And at the end of it all Luke reports that Peter, James and John kept silent and told no one any of the things they had seen. Now that is

something you can understand – because who would dare venture such a story. Who can ever understand someone else's experience of theophany.

It reminds me of Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when quite by accident she makes her way to the back of a wardrobe and all of a sudden finds herself in a strange land that she'll soon learn is Narnia. And it is a very real land full of fauns and witches and the great lion Aslan. It's a very real land – except that when she comes back and tries to tell her brothers and sister – they think she's gone crazy. What silly talk of Narnia. No one is really supposed to understand this deeply person experience we have with the divine.

Remember the shepherds of Bethlehem? Do you ever wonder what happened when they eventually went home and tried to explain to their family and friends what had just happened – angels appearing and singing, a babe lying in a manger, peace on earth good will toward all, the promise of Messiah? Can you imagine what each of their wives said? Time to take away the flask.

But these are the encounters stitched inside – if not inside our coats, inside our souls. And they are real. Very real. And with these experiences come power. There is nothing more powerful than the divine reality we sense deep inside of us. There are many things I wonder about in this world – but what I don't wonder about is how God has appeared in my life and reminded me that I am not alone, that I am dearly loved and that life is full of meaning. If I have any power in my life – if there is any good that I have done – if there is any purpose to my days – it all traces back to this note inside my coat.

It makes me think of a young woman in one of my former churches – I'll call her name Julie. Julie had a

pretty horrific childhood centered around many years of sexual abuse at the hands of a family member. And Julie remembered during those years as a young girl praying that God would stop these awful attacks on her body and spirit. But God never did. Never stepped in like a child would think a loving God would. So it was an easy leap for her to believe that there was no such thing as a loving God. No Pascal's wager for her. And then one morning as a middle-aged woman she stopped at the local convenience store for the Sunday paper and down the street she heard the peel of a church bell. A simple church bell in the steeple of the church where I happened to be serving. And for some reason – she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that that church bell was for her. The bell was tolling for her. She didn't know why, she just knew. And she said to herself, the paper can wait I will go to this place. And it happened to be the Sunday when the good people of that church were gathered to weep and console one another in the wake of an awful tragedy that had occurred within our church family (a young man had killed his parents). And she sat there in her pew and watched this church family trying the best we could to love each other in our grief. And she heard the message for the first time that God doesn't make these awful things happen, nor does he prevent them from happening. God simply loves us – often through each other. That's what she heard. And that was theophany. And Julie from that moment jumped into the life of that family of faith and used every gift she had to share that love with as many people as she could. That church bell was the note inside her coat. The power of God's love for her became the power of her love for God's people.

Do you hear what I'm saying? It is in these moments of our life when we are reminded of the unmistakable and powerful presence of God, these notes that are in turn stitched into our souls – that there is a power given us intended for God's people.

It may explain why the Gospel writers are insistent to include in their story of the disciples' powerful mountaintop moment – one that they quietly stitch into their souls – that the first thing they encounter when coming down from the mountain is a man and his son desperate for the same power. A father who has reached the end of his rope with a son possessed with some destructive spirit. And no one knows what

to do. And Jesus is so disappointed that no one seems to think they have the power. That this power of God's love with which have been entrusted is a power that can affect these poor people.

You see that's the thing – these intimate private encounters we have with the transcendent are intended for a public use. These personal notes of divine encounter stitched into our souls are the very power that God uses to propel us into the hurts of the world. Because you see it is these theophanies that remind us that it isn't a dog eat dog world. It isn't every man out for himself. It isn't she who dies with the most toys wins. It isn't bottom line of some financial spread sheet that's the goal line. It isn't how much you got in your 401K that determines the gold medal. It is these encounters with God that tell us that you don't have to hedge your bet. It is as real as the sun pouring through the window that God is love – that God loves me and God through me loves my neighbor. It is as sure a bet as you are going to find.

It's why I think it is safe to say that the most real thing you do in your life is something for someone else. If the most real thing in your life is what God has done for you, the most real thing you do in life is what you do with God's love for someone else. The most genuine gesture of your life is the sacrifice for someone else. The most real number you write down in your checkbook is not the number of your mortgage payment or the number of your IRA contribution or the number of your long-term care insurance installment. The most real use of your time is the time you give to someone else. The most real number is the number that is written down for the sake of God's love for his people.

Maybe that's what good ol' Charles Dickens had in mind when he wrote his little tale of Ebenezer Scrooge. The old miserly man counting every last penny of his sorry life. And then comes theophany – or at least the visit of the spirits. And these visits are more real to him than the gold in his safe. The first of the visits is from the ghost of Jacob Marley – Marley is his old business partner who was just as miserly as he. And Scrooge can't understand why Marley the ghost is bound in chains. And Marley speaks of having missed the great opportunity of life. And Scrooge says, "But you were always a good man of business,

Jacob." And Marley cries, "Business, mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business."

Somewhere along the way we have each been visited. The bell has tolled. The spirit has appeared. The fire has descended. The presence has been felt. And the note is written and stitched inside us. It is the most real thing that has ever happened. And the most real thing yet to happen is what we do with it. How we place our bet. What we make our business.



# The Note Inside Your Coat

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Church of the Palms

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