

THE PILGRIM'S COMPASS

Finding and Following the God We Seek

PAUL H. LANG

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Chapter 4

THE PILGRIM'S COMPASS— ENCOUNTER

The first point of the pilgrim's compass is *E* or “encounter.” When we daily orient our life toward God we can expect to grow in our awareness of the daily encounters we have with our Lord. Thomas Merton writes of the extraordinary place of encounter with the glory of God, noting both its elusiveness (it comes only as a gift) and its ubiquity (the gate of heaven is everywhere):

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our son-ship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish

completely. . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.¹

How do we encounter God? And is that something we control? Or are our encounters gifts freely given by God but never under our control? Merton writes that he has “no program for this seeing,” no formula to teach us that will reliably give us the vision of which he writes so powerfully. “But,” Merton insists, “the gate of heaven is everywhere.” The Christian tradition has long contemplated the pathways to our perception of these gateways to encounter with God. Surely Brother Lawrence is on to something when he teaches us to practice the discipline of being truly present to each moment with an expectation of encounter.² Jean-Pierre de Caussade too urges us to be attentive to our encounters with God in each present moment.³ While it seems clear that we cannot conjure encounters with God through any technique that we control, there is much that we can do to heighten our sensitivity to the presence of God in each passing moment.

We meet God in this world—not eating pie in the sky when we die. I grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, and though my own church did not speak this way, the overall Christian culture of the deep South in the 1960s and 1970s often focused on an expectation of meeting God at some future event (death, the Rapture). I was well into my seminary training before it really began to sink in to me that my relationship with God was not principally about securing my mansion in heaven for some future circumstance, but rather, my relationship with God was much like my relationship with those closest to me—*an ongoing and daily encounter with the person of God* who by grace chose to befriend me.

As an undergraduate music major I performed Mendelssohn's *Elijah* and memorized the words, "If with all your heart Ye truly seek me, Ye shall ever surely find me. Thus sayeth our God!"⁴ The pilgrim's compass has *E* at the top, and the *E* reminds us that we have encounters with God. And further, these encounters are not limited to some future situation, but are common to all of us daily. One of the most important spiritual disciplines therefore is to cultivate the awareness of our encounters with God.

Our encounters with God are more frequent when we are attuned to the world of the Spirit. When Jesus promises us that the Spirit will come to us, in chapter 14 and following in the Gospel according to John, he is alerting us to be mindful of the world of the Spirit. That world in which the Spirit is present surrounds us like air, it impinges on our thoughts, it is full of gentle invitations, and it awaits our attention.

Our encounter with God sometimes requires that we go looking for it. I am reminded of an old rabbinical story I heard years ago. As the story goes, a rabbi was keeping watch over his grandsons. The two boys were playing hide-and-seek, and the older boy hid first. The younger child searched and searched until he found his brother. They then changed roles, with the younger child hiding. The rabbi later was approached by the little one, who was crying. He said, "Tevi, what's the matter?" The little boy answered, "We were playing hide-and-seek and I hid and Saul didn't even look for me!" The old man took the child in his arms and comforted him. A bit later Tevi noticed that his grandfather was crying too. He said, "Pappa, why are you crying?" The old rabbi replied, "It is the same with God. God is hiding and no one is even looking for him." God is sometimes experienced by us as a master of hide-and-seek.

We must go in search of the one we love and who is hidden everywhere if we can just adjust our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our hearts to embrace our loving Lord hidden in the ordinary experience of each moment.

We meet God both in turmoil and in peace. We might be tempted to isolate our sense of encounter with God to those mountaintop moments of joy or wonder or those quiet moments when the world is hushed and still. God, no doubt, can be encountered in those moments. It is also true that encounters take place in the midst of turmoil and trouble. Scripture gives many examples of people who cry out and who find that God is listening and eager to help. Think of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt in Exodus 2. Think of the harrowing escape at the shore of the Red Sea in Exodus 14. Think of Psalm 107 with its case studies of God's faithful rescues. Think of Jesus in his postresurrection appearances bringing "peace" to his disciples in the fearful days following the crucifixion.

When I was in my midthirties I went through a difficult season of clinical depression. It took many years for me to recover. I spent many days in prayer during that time, hoping desperately for some kind of rescue, some kind of relief. One day as I sat in the empty sanctuary at Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia, I knew that God was with me in that place. And more than that, I knew that God loved the pathetic wretch I considered myself to be. I sat and prayed and wept, because for the first time in my life I was experiencing amazing grace—a love that was not waiting for me to get my act together, or for me to recover, or for anything. I knew that God loved me as I sat there, and I mark that moment as the true beginning of my recovery from deep depression. If God could love me even knowing who I was, then maybe I could learn to love myself again—even

knowing who I was. My encounter came in the midst of the turmoil of a painful depression.

Sometimes our encounter with God is like a burning bush. Though sometimes when I am trying to sort out a difficult decision I wish that God would be more directly present, I also agree with C. S. Lewis, who observed that sometimes in our prayers we have an encounter with God that delivers more than we bargained for.⁵ I had one of those “more than I bargained for” moments in prayer as a child. Growing up in a devout community, I learned as a young child that I should ask God to come into my heart. I am sure that I learned this at the Baptist vacation Bible school I attended with a friend. So one night when I was about seven years old (with my dog Peggy curled up at my feet) I rather mechanically went through the prayer asking God to come into my heart . . . and something happened! I was stunned and a little scared. It was hard to describe later, but it was the first time I knew that when I prayed there was *a person* on the other end of that prayer who was listening and who just might act in a way I could sense. It was exciting, and a little unnerving, and now I never belittle the experience of those Christians who have encountered God in a direct way because, while it has rarely been so flashy in my experience, I too have had a burning bush of sorts.

More often most of us encounter God as a still, small voice. A biblical narrative beautifully describes this:

“Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake;

and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kgs. 19:11–13)

I love the way Brother Carlo Carretto writes of this.

God's call is mysterious; it comes in the darkness of faith. It is so fine, so subtle, that it is only with the deepest silence within us that we can hear it. And yet nothing is so decisive and overpowering for a [person] on this earth, nothing surer or stronger. This call is uninterrupted: God is always calling us! But there are distinctive moments in this call of his, moments which leave a permanent mark on us—moments which we never forget.⁶

Most of the time I think many of us experience our encounters with God and the call to pilgrimage in this subtle way. We yearn for something, and we start searching out what it might be. We spend weeks or even years in prayer slowly sorting out what it is we think we are hearing and only then come to a confidence about what we are asked to do. It is less an "aha!" moment and more like an incrementally growing clarity that what we desire is consistent with what we think God desires for us.

The encounter with God happens in the encounter with strangers. This is one of those peculiar things one notices when reading Scripture. God is often discovered in the encounter with strangers. We find this with Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre, with Jacob at the river

Jabbok, with Jesus' disciples on the road to Emmaus and on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and many other places too.⁷ This has important implications for pilgrims. We answer the call to pilgrimage recognizing that part of our journey is to put us in the places where encounters with strangers are almost impossible to avoid. Our task is to keep in the forefront of our mind that each and every encounter is a potential encounter with the risen and present Lord.

An additional aspect of "stranger" must not be overlooked. Particularly when we travel on pilgrimage, we are choosing to become a stranger among other strangers. We set out on a journey that is certain to take us to places where we are not ensconced among familiar habits, familiar foods, and familiar people. Being the stranger can be a pathway to more fully understanding our Lord who came to dwell among strangers and to practice a gracious and redemptive way of life. As we look for and expect to find Christ in the others around us, we also consider how we are meant to be an expression of God's love in the way we travel.

There is also a way in which we can be a stranger and grow through interaction with strangers even when we are not traveling, or at least not traveling far. We can grow in this way by engaging in work near our home aimed at creating a workable human community. Often this will bring us to encounter the strangers who are close to home. For me this happened through the ministry of Habitat for Humanity. I got involved in building affordable housing in my hometown when I was in my twenties and was astonished to realize how insulated my life had been. Though I had grown up there and lived there for more than twenty years, I was unaware of the experiences that some of my fellow Greenvilleans were having in terms of substandard housing. Habitat for Humanity helped make strangers into friends as I

worked alongside a wide variety of my neighbors in creating simple, decent housing for all. Similar experiences happen at food pantries, clothes closets, and a host of other ministry settings.

Recently, as I was teaching about our encounters with God, I invited the students to share times when they encountered God. At first everyone chuckled when one student said, “I encounter God when I come home and my dog joyfully greets me.” However, as the seconds ticked by, I could see a better understanding sink in as people recalled their own encounters with a pet whose love was full of grace. The capacity of your dog to love you in spite of your many foibles is legend. It is why we have T-shirts with the “prayer,” “Today I am trying to be the person my dog thinks I am.” Many of us have been shaped by a religious culture focused so effectively on our guilt and need for shame that we have lost touch with the reality of grace—an unmerited and unexpected inclusion in someone else’s love. When my student named her encounter with God as something she experienced in the encounter with the delighted reception from her dog, she was naming that experience of grace.

Sometimes a place becomes a place of encounter.

Many pilgrimage destinations are places where people over many years have felt an encounter with God occurring. The site becomes a place of pilgrimage because it seems to be a place where the veil between the ordinary and the holy is very thin. After a time, the place becomes immersed in the prayers of millions of people of faith who have visited and prayed over thousands of years, and those prayers too have a way of sanctifying the place.

On a recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I found myself with a free day in Jerusalem. I walked to the Church of Saint Anne, a small church with a long history. It is

dedicated to Anne the mother of Mary, mother of Jesus. The ancient story is that the church is built over a grotto where Mary is said to have been born. The historicity of this claim is uncertain. However, I sat in St. Anne's for hours on my free day in Jerusalem. I prayed, I journaled, and I watched as countless pilgrims came and went. St. Anne's marks the beginning of the Via Dolorosa, so nearly every pilgrim to Jerusalem finds their way to St. Anne's, if only for a brief glimpse inside before beginning the walk of the way of sorrow. As I sat quietly amid the churn of hundreds of pilgrims coming and going, I was keenly aware of the many prayers that had been offered to God in that space since its creation in the early twelfth century. By the time I left hours later, the historicity of the claim about the church being over the place where Mary was born had become totally incidental to me. What was undeniably real, faithful, beautiful, and true was that the place was made holy by the faithful people who came and offered something of themselves to God in that sanctuary—as I myself had done.

We encounter God through the Word of God in Scripture. We can be reading a portion of the Bible and come to realize that it is not just a story about someone else, but in some mysterious way is a word meant for us. My encounter with Psalm 127 was such a moment. It happened at a time when I was very ambitious and hard working. I was spending an unhealthy number of hours trying to accomplish good ministry through sheer grit and determination. I was also feeling the symptoms of burnout and fatigue. My friend and mentor Ben Johnson suggested that I spend regular time in the Psalms, and after only a few weeks of casually reading the Psalms I came across Psalm 127 and immediately realized that it held an important word for me, personally. The psalmist writes near the beginning, “Why

do you rise up early and go late to your rest, eating the bread of anxious toil? Do you not know that God loves you and desires to give you rest?" (au. trans.). I knew as soon as I read the words of the psalm that I had encountered a word of God which held an important corrective for me. The psalm was no longer *just* a psalm. It had become a word of God for me personally.

The heavens are telling the glory of God. Certain landscapes seem to open us up to an encounter with God. Traditionally these are mountains and desert landscapes. I know that whenever I am walking in mountainous places with vast vistas around me, I do feel a sense of joy and wonder at God's creativity. I also feel a sense of peace, awe, and wonder when on the prairies of the Midwest or the moors of Northern Scotland—anywhere that there is a big sky created by unobstructed views to a distant horizon. There is a way in which God speaks to us through the landscape, and once we begin paying attention to the impact that the surrounding landscape has on our spirit, we are often better able to hear God trying to say something to us. Indigenous people and their various faith traditions have often been far more attentive to this aspect of encountering God. Christians too can find encouragement to seek encounters with God in the wonders of the world in, for example, the creation psalms (Pss. 8, 19, 104, and 148, to name only a few).

Practices lead to encounter. As the previous pages suggest, the pathways to our encounters with God are as varied and unique as our individual lives, but we can learn from one another and from those who have come before how to live before God with a deeper attention and expectation of encounter. Those who desire to perceive these encounters and who are willing to be disciplined in their

spiritual formation will be blessed. Practical ways to do this include:

- **Open your eyes.** Ask God to show you what you need to see, and then pay attention.
- **Listen with your ears,** particularly to the voices of those who are often silenced.
- **Be reflective about your life.** Keep a journal, practice the daily examen, wonder.
- **Be fearless in the face of change.** Ask, “What can God show me now that would have been hard for me to know before the change?”
- **Pray.** It is the lifeblood of your relationship with God. Any of a thousand ways to pray will do.
- **Cultivate compassion.** Because God is so often encountered in another person, it is a great help to you to learn to be faithful and merciful to those around you.
- **Pay attention to your inner yearnings.** What makes your heart sing? God is probably in that!
- **Serve.** Remember that both the sheep and the goats in Jesus’ parable (Matt. 25:31–46) were surprised to realize that they were encountering God in their interactions with “the least of these.”
- **Learn from the saints.** Let the witness of Scripture and the counsel of the great saints of the church be your companions along the way.
- **Find and feed a Christian friendship** with someone who can help you discern the ways in which God is being encountered in your life. Spiritual direction is also a good way to do this.
- **Worship regularly.** There is no substitute for the practice of worship. Daily worship is not too often.

Our encounters with God are often an invitation to change or to follow and thus to enter a liminal⁸ state where there are foreshadowings of something new coming to life within us. For this reason our encounters often include a measure of resistance and struggle within us. The nature of the struggle that our encounter with God provokes is the subject of the following chapter, on the second point of the pilgrim's compass. It is enough here to simply notice how often this encounter-struggle pairing occurs in Scripture. Jacob encounters God in the stranger at the river Jabbok and immediately wrestles (struggles) with God through the night. Saul is knocked from his feet and forced to deal with his blindness on the way to becoming the great apostle who writes many of the epistles included in the New Testament. The disciples who encounter Jesus struggle to understand, struggle to be faithful as followers, and struggle to keep courage in the time of trial. Having examined our encounters with God, let us now consider the struggles that are often paired with encounters.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Think about a time when you encountered something holy. What was that holy moment like? Was it connected to a place or an experience you had? How did the encounter with the Holy change you?
2. How do you think that times of change and transition open us up to encounters with God?
3. What landscapes evoke wonder and awe in you? Have you experienced an encounter with God that was connected with a particular landscape?

JOURNALING AND PRAYER EXERCISES

1. In prayer, present yourself before God. Pay attention to the present moment and be alert to the holiness of the presence of God with you in the present moment. Let your mindfulness of God continue after the time in prayer ends and you return to your daily activities so that all of your life remains infused with the sense of the holiness of each present moment.
2. Our encounters with God are often an invitation to change or to follow and in so doing to enter into a liminal state where there are foreshadowings of something new coming to life within us. Where are you encountering God at this time in your life? Have you considered how God may be inviting you to something new? How does the encounter evoke either resistance and fear or hopeful anticipation in you?

SUGGESTED BOOKS FOR FURTHER READING

- Carlo Carretto, *Letters from the Desert* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).
- Tilden Edwards, *Living in the Presence* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).
- Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1982).