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“Revelation - The Why of an ESE” - Rev. Seth D Jones ©

Numbers 22, Luke 1

In 1205, at 24 years old, St. Francis of Assisi had an ESE at the little chapel at San Damiano. There, he heard a voice calling him to rebuild the church.

"Prostrating himself before an Image of the Crucified, he was filled with no small consolation of spirit as he prayed. And with eyes full of tears he gazed up, and he heard with his bodily ears a Voice proceeding from that Cross, saying thrice: "Francis, go and repair My House, which, as thou seest, is falling utterly into ruin."<sup>1</sup>

For a while, St. Francis believed it was simply that this little chapel was meant to be rebuilt, but through prayer and reflection over time, he began to understand that the message Jesus gave him meant the entire church. This ESE was just one of many that transformed a young, wealthy playboy into a legendary force in the Western world.

St Francis' ESE, just one of many throughout his lifetime, is emblematic of what is meant when we speak of an ESE - an event that significantly, if not radically, reorients one's mindset in such a way that the activity, thinking, and one's entire intellectual, spiritual, and existential relationship to the world is completely changed. In the example of St. Francis of Assisi, the Revelation at San Damiano affected a large reforming change in himself, his village of Assisi, and throughout the entire Catholic Church of the time. For himself, Francis became a compassionate and giving person, having once been self-involved and flagrant with his wealth and behavior. In his village of Assisi, Francis became a kind of Pied Piper for all the young adults in town. He attracted the best and the brightest to his growing community of radical Jesus followers. For the leaders of Assisi, they were horrified. There were wars to fight, businesses to run, and taxes to collect. Francis undermined all this. His influence on the western Catholic Church of the day grew slowly and eventually engulfed the cardinals and the Pope himself. In the language of the Catholic Church, Francis is considered the First Reformation. Francis' reach eventually extended into other cultures, other religions, and into the care and tending of the human and non-human world, and is still an influence today.

Until something is communicated in some way, there is generally very little information about who or what is being encountered in an ESE. Jesus could appear and show or tell the experiencer nothing. How does one communicate the meaning of the Appearance if there are no words or symbols to pass on to others? This is true in other ESEs as well. Without the message, without the Revelation, we fill in the gaps. We are pattern-forming and pattern-seeking creatures, and it is within the patterns that we find meaning. So without a discernible reason for the being or situation showing up in our ESE, we are left to make up the reasons why.

Revelation, in our stages of an ESE, is when the entity, event, or encounter shows or tells the experiencer what is going on and who or what is being encountered, sometimes followed by instructions going forward. The Revelation is often the unveiling of the purpose, or the command, or the identity of

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Bonaventure, "The Life of St Francis of Assisi". Ecatholic2000,.com.  
<https://www.ecatholic2000.com/bonaventure/assisi/francis.shtml>. (accessed October 27, 2021)10/27/2021.

the ESE. When angels appear regularly in the Bible, and when they show up, they reveal their purpose. Sometimes, the Revelation is with words. Sometimes, it is with signs and symbols. Words may make the Revelation more clarified, but signs and symbols often make Revelations more complex and clouded.

When the Angel Gabriel shows up to the young Mary, Scripture tells us "she was greatly troubled" (Lk 1:29). Seeing this, Gabriel answers with the traditional words of comfort, "Do not be afraid" (1:30). Then Gabriel reveals the purpose of his troubling visit—that Mary will be the mother of the Son of God, Jesus.[RJ1] In a specific place to a specific person (Set and Setting), an angel has appeared to Mary (Appearance), and told her why he has appeared (Revelation). Mary's life from this moment forward has been completely changed by her ESE.

Mary, I would think, was probably overwhelmed by this vast message, in all its earthly and heavenly promise. Nonetheless, she aligns herself with God's will as revealed by the angel. She says,

*'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her. (Lk 1:38).*

Mary has a lot to think about now. Not the least of which is, how do I communicate this ESE to my family and village, much less my arranged husband, Joseph? But that is a conversation for next week when we discuss the aspect of Disclosure. For now, the message from the angel is that God desires Mary to be the mother of the Son of God. And Mary responds by agreeing to this message. The Revelation has completed its course.

## Balaam's Donkey

In Balaam's case, Balaam experiences two Revelation messages from two different sources in an extended ESE. Remember last week, I said that Balaam's donkey was having an ESE when it saw the angel with a sword in the road. Upon seeing the angel, the donkey behaves as donkeys are meant to behave. Balaam shows himself in this story to be woefully ignorant in animal behavior, and appears to have very little regard for the loyal and devoted nature of donkeys in general.

Before we get into the direct messages that Balaam receives, it is important to remember that at this time in history, donkeys were considered regal beasts. They were highly symbolic and considered highly intelligent. This is because donkeys are extremely loyal, loving creatures with exceptional intelligence. Donkeys were domesticated 3000 years before camels were, so they have been friends of humans for over 6000 years. Donkeys were often buried with kings in Egypt and surrounding areas. James Gorman of the New York Times says of donkeys:

*You may have heard, for instance, that donkeys are stubborn. But Ben Hart, a trainer who works for the Donkey Sanctuary in Britain, put it this way: "Anybody who says a donkey is stubborn has been outsmarted by a donkey."*

*They are cautious, he said, not contrary. They like to think before they act. The reason may be that their ancestor, the African wild ass, is not a herd animal. Wild asses have individual territories, and each must decide where to go and when to eat, run or fight. Donkeys have retained some of that thoughtful intelligence, said Dr. Marshall, who was not at the symposium. They like to decide*

*for themselves. So if you try to lead a donkey over a shadow on the ground that looks a bit like the edge of a cliff, the donkey may balk.<sup>2</sup>*

One would think after someone has ridden a donkey their whole life (Num 22:30), they would know their donkey. Balaam does not. The outrageousness and sheer tragedy of this is captured by the donkey's first words to Balaam:

*'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?'*

Then the donkey says, after Balaam's threat to kill the donkey,

*'Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you in this way?'* And he said, 'No.' (Num 22:28-30)

The tragedy of this broken relationship is also captured by Rembrandt's painting of the donkey on the bulletin today. The donkey is clearly distressed and rightfully so. His plaintive and fearful eyes, which Rembrandt has made the focus of the painting, reflect the words the donkey speaks in Scripture.

We are getting ahead of ourselves a bit. Let's just stay with what is happening here. **A donkey is talking.** It doesn't matter if you see this as a 'real' story or not. Something is being communicated here that is so important that it makes more sense for an animal to say it than a human. Between this story and now, donkeys have definitely fallen in stature in the human mind. They are exceptionally abused in many places around the world and are considered a disposable creature, as opposed to the noble and regal horse - a latecomer to the domestication game, by the way. What if the animals could speak? What if they actually do, in their own way?

Proverbs 12 says of our relationship with the animals,

*<sup>10</sup> The righteous know the needs of their animals,  
but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.*

Knowing the needs of our animals is exactly the opposite of cruelty. Knowing their needs, in fact, can only lead to kindness.

Psalm 8 says,

*<sup>4</sup> what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?*

*<sup>5</sup> Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honour.*

*<sup>6</sup> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,*

*<sup>7</sup> all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,*

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<sup>2</sup> Gorman, James. New York Times (Online), New York: New York Times Company. Oct 31, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> *the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*  
<sup>9</sup> *O Lord, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

We make a grave error when we get hung up on what dominion means here. This psalm is echoing the words from Genesis when, upon creating the living things, God looked at them and declared them all good (Gen 1:24-25). The praise that is happening here is that the animals reflect the majesty of God. If a thing reflects the majesty of God, should we not honor it with the same concern we honor God? This is where our stewardship of the creatures of this earth begins.

And so, Balaam's donkey speaks.

While Mary gets one Revelation, Balaam gets two. One Revelation is his 'come to Jesus' moment about his treatment of animals, from his articulate donkey. The second Revelation is from the angel. Balaam wishes he had a sword to kill the donkey, but the angel has a sword and is prepared to kill Balaam. The angel says to him,

*'Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me. <sup>33</sup>The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely I would by now have killed you and let it live.'* (Num 22:32).

The second message is that Balaam is on the wrong path. He is not following God's will. Balaam sees and hears the angel because he has finally seen and heard the pain of his animal companion. This is quite the ESE, isn't it?

The Revelation to Balaam is layered and complex. But Balaam realizes he is in fact on the wrong path. Not following God's will leads to violence, and by just staying with the Revelation of this ESE, we see that mistreatment of animals arises from not following God's will. By the goodness of creation itself that God has declared, we can move beyond the mistreatment of animals and say that the mistreatment of creation and humans arises from not following God's will.

The gravity of all this, the sheer weight of violence committed and its effect upon his lifelong companion, causes Balaam to repent. He says,

*'I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home.'* (Num 22:34)

The wrong road Balaam is going down is shown to be a metaphoric road because the angel tells Balaam to keep going in the direction he is headed. But now, there is a fundamental change. Balaam knows his own way is no longer trustworthy. The angel tells Balaam to keep going down the road, but from this moment forward Balaam can only speak the words God tells him to speak. We can see in the story that Balaam's sources of hearing God's will are non-human, one being the most earthy of earth creatures, the donkey, and the other the most ethereal and heavenly of spirit creatures, the angel. The voice of God's will for Balaam will be from extraordinary sources. This is what he is now called to listen for.

We have strayed a bit here. Now that we have a few ESE messages, some Revelations, we have already pushed into our topic for next week, which is Disclosure, which is the beginning of making meaning of ESEs. Even so, in the moment of Revelation in an ESE much personal and cosmic meaning can be conveyed, as we see in both our stories today. The aspect of Revelation keeps pushing us beyond the ESE to make meaning of what has happened. It is very hard to just stay with the experience. But I can tell you with some confidence that we have already spent way more time with a talking donkey than most commentators in the Protestant tradition, and likely the more liturgical traditions, have in many years. **It is a talking donkey!**

The Revelation of an ESE may not always be words spoken, however. When words or clear ideas are transmitted, that is a blessing, especially for when we prepare to disclose our ESE to others. Sometimes, though, the Revelation will come in the form of symbols and signs. This makes things much more problematic. The interpretation and understanding can stretch out for years and years. Signs are a little easier to deal with, because a sign often communicates in the language of the culture which surrounds it, like the Hannafords symbol in New England. We all know what it is without seeing the name Hannafords attached to it. Symbols, however, because they float through cultures and time much more fluidly than signs, can make understanding at once very intimate and very difficult. Symbols are often vehicles of transmission that carry story and myth across boundaries, generations, and language.

The best example of this symbolic Revelation comes from an ESE confirming the holiness of St. Francis of Assisi. Francis had a habit of praying in a cave near La Verna. Sometimes he would pray for many hours and one of the brothers would bring him water and bread in the cave. Then, on September 14, 1224, according to witnesses and Francis himself, a seraph with a flame in the image of the Crucified Christ descended on Francis. When the flame lifted, Francis was imprinted with the wounds of Christ in his palms and his feet. Many saw this as a testifying experience to the holiness of Francis, but Francis was embarrassed and ashamed of his wounds, feeling he did not deserve such a 'gift' and focused attention on him rather than Christ. Francis did not really ever know what to make of the stigmata, as such a thing is called. He was at once grateful and ashamed, and could never make sense of why he was chosen to carry the wounds of Christ. The Revelation did not afford him much personal meaning. Francis could not connect the story of Christ on the Cross with his personal experience of the wounds of Christ. The symbol of the wounds transmitted image and pain and suffering, but not meaning for Francis. Or to put it another way, the Revelation of the symbol of Christ's wounds on the Cross was greater than Francis' ability to understand. Francis suffered greatly from this symbolic Revelation. The pain from the wounds was profound, and he stayed with him all the way to his death two years later on October 4, 1226<sup>3</sup>. The stigmata was one of the miracles which the church used to determine Francis' sainthood, among others.

As with all aspects of the ESE, one aspect may flow into the other. Sometimes, the Set and Setting only matters after the ESE. Sometimes, the Set and Setting is an aspect of the Appearance. Sometimes, the Appearance and the Revelation are the same thing. Sometimes, there is only an Appearance and no Revelation. Much meaning can be communicated in the Revelation, either by word, idea, sign, or symbol, but the ESE does not stop with the Revelation. There is one more stage, and it is the final stage that is required for meaning to arise. That stage is when the story is told to others, when the Disclosure happens

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<sup>3</sup> Julien Green. *God's Fool: The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers. 1983. pgs 251-271.

to the community. Disclosure will be what we discuss next week, and when you will find out why I am so interested in this subject.

Amen.