

November 28, 2021 - The First Sunday of Advent

“Disclosure: The Meaning of ESEs” - Rev. Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: Numbers 22, Luke 1

I hope over the last few weeks I have helped you see by way of Balaam and his talking donkey, much less his encounter with an angel in the road, and by way of Mary, mother of Jesus, that these extraordinary spiritual experiences in Scripture ask us to sink ourselves deeply into the epic strangeness of what is going on in these stories. In giving significance to ESEs, though, we have to allow ourselves to get used to a universe that is much more complex and strange than we often allow ourselves to accept. An ESE, facilitated or spontaneous, opens up the reducing valve of the mind, as Aldous Huxley said, and, once opened, we have to deal with a whole vast universe of inexplicable things. You have heard some inexplicable events and experiences during the last few weeks, beyond the stories from Scripture.

Let's review where we have been:

The first week, we talked about set and setting. Set is the state of our mind when an ESE occurs. Set means the state of mind and how we are perceiving at the time of an ESE. Setting is the space we experience the ESE within and where an ESE is occurring. The setting may have great significance to the experience or none at all. Setting can also affect our state of mind.

The second week, we talked about Appearance. This stage of an ESE is whatever is showing up and can include everything from divine beings to discarnate and disembodied entities to fairies and brownies to cryptids, like Bigfoot or Hodags, to bizarre bodily experiences to unrecognizable dimensional spaces. Sometimes, what is showing up is intelligible and fits our cultural and experiential background. Sometimes, it does not make much sense at all. Sometimes, an ESE will simply be a thing showing up and we are left to our own devices to figure something out from the Appearance.

Other times, we have the third aspect of an ESE, which is Revelation. Revelation is the stage where an ESE tells us why what has appeared has shown up. Sometimes, there is a message disclosed from the beings or creatures that have appeared. Sometimes, the revelation might be a powerful personal insight from the ESE. The revelation is a kind of internal meaning that has been shown to us.

Meaning-making of an ESE is often a long-term effort, however. The extraordinariness of the experience, in conjunction with the weirdness of the Divine, does not lend itself to quick interpretations, particularly when we keep the ESE to ourselves. The meaning-making is limited to our own reflection and self-awareness, which can only get us so far. This is because ESEs are, finally, communal. Full meaning cannot be made until the ESE is shared with others. This engagement with the community is the fourth aspect of an ESE, called The Disclosure.

The Disclosure is the open-ended process that seeks meaning across time and place.

Meaning-making is fluid, slippery, and subject to revision over time and across personal and cultural boundaries. While meaning-making requires community, that community may have layered definitions as well. These layers may include a close community of like-minded, committed people, as in a church or a circle of friends. It may include an academic community where ideas and experiments are tossed back and forth and analyzed for depth and understanding, as in a research lab. The community may stretch across time and place by way of books and writings about the subject, or today, YouTube videos and social media. This seeking of meaning across multiple channels is a primary part of an ESE. The structure of an ESE demands meaning be made of the experience.

Let's briefly see how this works with our readings for today. When we look at Balaam, his disclosure is quite lengthy. What we do know from our time with Balaam and his donkey is that Balaam can only say anything that the Lord has told him to say. So we get this brief discussion with the king Balak, who essentially says, "Why are you late? I brought you here to speak a word of victory to my troops before war. In fact, I paid you to do so." Balaam responds by saying, "Yes, about that. I no longer have the power to just say anything. Now, whatever God puts in my mouth, I must say." Balaam does not disclose that he got all this from a talking donkey and an angel in the road. Even so, the next two chapters are Balaam's prophecies of the destruction of Balak's kingdom.

With Mary, we see a deeper disclosure. Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, who is carrying the child John, who will become John the Baptist. When Mary and Elizabeth meet, Elizabeth tells Mary, "The child in my womb leaped for joy at the sound of your greeting". The gathering of the women generates one of the most powerful poems in Scripture, Mary's Magnificat, which is a hymn of joy and hope regarding the meaning of the coming birth of her son.

Balaam's prophecies and Mary's Magnificat are the initial forays into finding the communal meaning of their respective ESEs. The way Luke has constructed his Gospel, we can read Mary's initial Disclosure of her ESE in her hymn as the beginning of Mary's meaning-making. When we read Luke, we need to remember that Mary's perspective drives Luke's narrative. One way to imagine the Gospel of Luke is to see it as Mary making sense of the life and story of her son, Jesus, a story which begins with an ESE. Mary's ESE with the Angel Gabriel looks very different at the end of the story than at the beginning. The meaning making is continuous throughout Mary's life, and because Luke has written it down, we are now also included in Mary's meaning-making these many years later.

Disclosing something deeply personal like an ESE can be awkward. Worse, the disclosure to others may not bring any clarity initially. It is however the beginning of meaning-making. In the same way Jesus' life, death, and resurrection call us to develop a taste for ambiguity, ESEs call us to develop

some experience with awkwardness and lack of clarity. Telling people personal things can be uncomfortable, and as a faith community, we need practice. As Kate said to me, “Any disclosure is a leap of faith and a leap into faith.”

This morning, I want to disclose to you a significant ESE experience I had. Like Balaam and Mary, some parts of my ESEs are worth telling and others aren't. Some parts of an ESE are meant only for the person; other parts are meant for others to hear. I believe the ancient world was much better than we are at discerning what was for others and what was not. Maybe they knew more about the process of meaning-making than we do. But we can learn again.

Three years ago I told you (off the cuff) I was in a study with Johns Hopkins University for Clergy. I did not tell you much about the study I was in, except that it was about mystical experiences. I have referred several times to spontaneous and facilitated ESEs this month. Spontaneous ESEs are those ESEs that come upon us with no preparation or expectation, and facilitated ESEs are prepared for by meditation, studying certain rituals, or by way of particular substances. The study I was in at Johns Hopkins were facilitated experiences designed to trigger mystical experiences in people who have been primed for the mystical by way of study and belief.

The study will be coming out in the next 3 months or so, and some of us expect it to be a bit of a big deal. 24 of us were part of the study, which took almost 6 years to complete. We went through the study separately and without knowledge of who the others were. I went through the study in December of 2018 and January of 2019. We came from several different faith traditions and I don't know all of them, since identities of the participants are confidential. I have since met several people who were in the study.

How would a researcher trigger and facilitate a mystical experience? There is a class of substances in the world that do this very effectively and have for millennia. These substances have been used by indigenous groups of people all around the world, by great civilizations like Greece and ancient India, and now by researchers in universities and studies around the world. These substances are called ‘psychedelics’, or ‘mind-manifesting/altering’ substances. At high doses, these substances can facilitate or trigger mystical experiences. This is what the study I was in was trying to find out about.

Some people will have mystical experiences, ESEs, with these substances. Some people won't. The study I participated in was run through the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research. The team there, headed up by Dr. Roland Griffiths, have been studying psychedelics since 2000. Several thousand people have been through various studies with psychedelics for treatment with addiction, depression, end-of-life treatment, and PTSD. Each participant has a couple sitters or guides who are with people as they go through these 6-7 hour experiences. It is cutting edge research that is changing the world as we speak.

This is all interesting, but you may want to know why I would do such a thing. The Johns Hopkins study is one of the wildest things I have ever done in my life. I am very glad I did it, but I am in no hurry to do something like it again. The study was designed to facilitate a mystical experience with psychedelics, and for me it most certainly did. I did this study because I have had several significant ESEs throughout my life. All of them were spontaneous. My ESEs, prior to the study at Johns Hopkins, are the reason I am a pastor in the church. Then in April of 2018, an email from a friend in April of 2018 sent me an ad he saw seeking recruits for this study, and I followed through and qualified.

When Dr William Richards, who has joined us on ZOOM today and designed this particular study, asked me why I wanted to participate in the study, I said, "I have had glimpses of what is beyond the veil and want to see the superstructure of reality." I definitely saw things in this study, and have a sense that what I saw is a deeper glimpse of that superstructure. Before my Johns Hopkins experience, I had no experience with psychedelics. To be honest, they scared me. It doesn't help that I am allergic to all kinds of things and didn't want to go into a reaction. Oh, and it is a Class 1 felony to possess these substances in most places in the USA right now. But with Johns Hopkins, I was in a safe, controlled, observed environment 650 feet from the entrance to the best emergency room in the country. So I said yes to the study.

There were two sessions in the study, which took place in a calm room on the campus of Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. The room was softly decorated with low lighting, pictures on the wall, and curated music playing. The study was designed around a substance called psilocybin, which is the active ingredient in 'magic mushrooms'. Psilocybin creates a 6-8 hour experience that is, for lack of a better way to put it, a deep dive into and beyond one's personal psyche. It removes the reducing valve, would be one way to say it. I believe these substances do not just show us the inside of our personal mind, though they do that, but also show us the structure of the mind itself. This is why psychedelics are being used to study the nature of consciousness.

If I were you, I would have two questions at this point: What happened in the experiences, and What does this have to do with my faith and with yours?

Those are great questions, and I am glad you asked. I am still making meaning of my experiences and that is part of why I am disclosing this to you today. Given that is true of my personal experiences and my Johns Hopkins experiences, I have realized it is also true of the ESEs we claim as part of our faith. This is why we are still gathering together 1988 years after Jesus' resurrection. We are still making meaning of Jesus' ESE and the ESEs of the disciples. We are still making meaning of our faith.

My experiences at Johns Hopkins strengthened my faith. I am still not sure how, but I think an effect of an ESE, and particularly psychedelics, is to reinforce and reframe one's beliefs in such a way that they help align a person with their external experience of the world. Even though my faith was strengthened, I didn't see God or Jesus.

What I did experience during my first session was that the universe is a vast, shimmering, multi-dimensional cathedral built with transparent bricks that glitter with iridescent colors, some of which are not on the color spectrum. I was led into the cathedral by the Appearance of an angelic being who led me down a huge onyx spiral staircase. Then, I crossed over into another part of the cathedral. This crossing over was almost like a death. On the other side, Jean Brookwell met me. Jean took me on a little tour of the undercrofts of the vast, shimmering cathedral. Then she showed me a cobblestone street in Paris. It was night and the chairs were leaned against the tables and the moon reflected off the shiny rocks in the street. Jean told me that this is where she hangs out now. Yes, heaven is Paris at night. And that is why I am learning French now. Almost 3 years later, I remember all this like it happened yesterday. I will tell you about my second experience some other day. Suffice it to say, that experience was radically different from this one.

Sometimes, as we heard last week, ESEs transmit a Revelation, or message. The message I received in this first experience was one that filled me with grief and now directs my life. That message was "Beauty is leaving the earth and some must choose to be curators and carriers of beauty so beauty can be remembered in the future." I am still working out what that means, but it for now tells me I must always be looking for the beautiful because I need to remember it for others.

I am disclosing this to you not because I want you to believe it to be 'real' or even as a testimony of my faith life, even though I consider the experience to be a clarifying journey of the Spirit. I tell you because I want you to understand the power of ESEs to change lives. In the studies at Johns Hopkins, it is the ESE, the mystical encounter, according to the researchers, that changes people. I want us as a church to understand that the universe is way more complex than what we perceive and are told to perceive by advertisers, news, preachers, or scientists. I read the news and so see ads. I listen to other preachers. I love science and listen to scientists. But the world is so much bigger than they would have you believe.

We are profoundly sensitive creatures. We may be the most sensitive creatures on the planet. That means we are first and foremost experiencers of the world. Some of those experiences reach beyond this material world into the forms of the worlds of mind, and then beyond there into the spiritual worlds. These experiences and realms are real, in the sense that when we experience them they come to us as an experience of, as Paul Tillich says, the 'really real'.

You are an exquisitely attuned instrument which receives and perceives far more than you are aware. In saying this, we are far into the realms of the mystical. How shall we make meaning of what we have brought back from that mystical awareness, from the ESE we have experienced or heard about? I believe that, whatever our faith commitment may be, we need to begin to share with one another what those forms of mind and spiritual realms are like for one another. This is really what we are up to on Sunday mornings, I think. Making meaning together of the deeper things of this universe.

This is why I care about ESEs. I know the study of such a thing leads me into weird areas, because ESEs are themselves inherently weird. So I talk about weird things and try to help us see the strangeness of what we are talking about in our lives of faith. If you give any credence to what I am saying, we must also recognize there are significant dangers as well. Some people have significant disorders that cross over in some of these areas. We need to discern the experience from the disorder. Also, people can be misled rather easily. People can use spiritual experiences to lord it over others or use their own experiences against others. I know because Kate and I were in a cult and had our spiritual experiences used against us. We know how the extraordinary, the spiritual, and the experiential can be used to harm and control other people. We need to stay awake to the dangers of being manipulated and misled.

But let's be real. We gather in this place to celebrate several ESEs every year as high holidays of the church. If you read about Jesus' mother, Mary, Jesus' miracles, Jesus at the Transfiguration, Jesus' Resurrection, the experience of the disciples after the Resurrection - fantastic ESEs, each and every one - and think the faith is built on something other than Extraordinary Spiritual Experiences, I don't really know what to tell you. People do not commit their lives to a good idea or an interesting thought. People commit because of an experience they have had, or because they trust the experience someone else has had.

The future of the church, the future of any faith tradition, is the experiential. Of all the traditions, the Christian church should be at the vanguard of being the safe place to share ESEs, to be a gathering place to learn about the beings and ways of being that are of this world and beyond this world. To what end, you may ask? Well, as Christians, it is to participate in the great, creative life of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit in this set and setting we all occupy. As an individual, I think it is as different as each person. As a church and as an individual, we still have to make meaning of our experiences. Let's do it together and see what appears and is revealed. Some of you have had ESEs that are life-changing. How will you make meaning of that on your own? I suggest to you, you can't. You need other experiencers to share with, to whom you can disclose.

If you have taken communion with us, if you have prayed with us, if you have shared in the Holy Spirit with us, you are an experiencer. On this first Sunday of Advent, we are participating in an

extraordinary, spiritual, ongoing experience that reaches all the way back to the moment Mary said to Elizabeth, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant.” Even now, we are still making meaning.

Amen.