



LESSONS IN LIVING

Insights from the Mystics

“Part 1: The Answer is In Your Confusion”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
June 7, 2026

Scripture Reading: Kings 19:9-13 *(The Inclusive Bible)*

Elijah went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of YHWH came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah replied, “I have been very zealous for YHWH, God Omnipotent. The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death by the sword. I am the only one left, and now they’re trying to kill me, too.” God said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of YHWH, for YHWH is about to pass by.”*

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks by YHWH’s power—but YHWH was not in the whirlwind. After the wind, there was an earthquake—but YHWH was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire—but YHWH was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”*

The Cloud of Unknowing, Ch. 4, p. 128

When I say “darkness”, I mean a privation of knowing, just as whatever you do not know or have forgotten is dark to you, because you do not see it with your spiritual eyes. For this reason, that which is between you and your God is termed, not a cloud of the air, but a cloud of unknowing.

** YHWH represents the divine name found in the Hebrew text. It represents the Divine Mystery and, traditionally, is not pronounced. Instead, we say “God” or some other term of reverence.*

Sermon

We're beginning a new series. I don't know how long it will go. I'm not that far from writing leave. I've got about a month and a week. So it may be over by then. It may go further.

But I feel right now the political situation is so painful that I know there are times when what keeps me going--it's often called mysticism. People usually think of that as magical or supernatural. But to me, it's that sense of reverence we feel when we look at the ocean or the sky, when we understand a profound truth or see a deep beauty. It's almost like something is whispering to us, and that really is the only reason I'm religious at all.

I don't want to disappoint anybody, but Calvin and Luther are not on my reading list. I do read some, and Augustine, but for me, it's the Tolstoys, it's bell hooks, it's people who are animated by a sense of reverence and interconnectedness. And when I talk about religion, that's what I'm talking about--the experience--not an idea that we call God, but an experience of the depths of our being, of our connections to everything that lives.

And in a sense that reality itself talks to us. The intelligence in our head is an expression of a kind of mathematical nature of the universe itself. Our pulse resonates to the pulse of nature. We are children of whatever that mysterious something is.

We're looking at a story today that sounds fantastical. It is. I don't believe it physically happened. I would have problems with a God who destroys other religions. But that's the story. You have a prophet who has a very narrow view. And you've never heard this before, but they believe that the problems in their nation are from foreigners coming in. [laughter] And that if you can force everybody to worship the same way, you'll save the nation for God. Not doing it for yourself.

This is a story that is repeated through history in every religion there is. It's the implosion of well-intended people who lose the sense of the transcendent. They lose the sense of the universal. Moreover, they become afraid of things that are different than them. Their idea of God is a magnification of their own ego. They're not aware of that, but they worship a God that mysteriously hates the same people they do, loves the same people they do, and looks surprisingly like them. Therefore, everyone who's different is inferior.

The old, old, old story. It's manifested in so many different ways.

So we have a wisdom tale. It's worth is not what happened in history. It's worth is not what happens in science. It's--what are the patterns of life? What are the stories that occur and reoccur over and over again through history? Those are the stories we need, but they're mythological. They're crafted by wise people to help us recognize in our own place and time these principles.

On a completely different matter, Pete Hegseth—[laughter]—because I'm not going to get political. You know that. [laughter]

They've revamped the chaplain guide. They used to honor over 200 religions, but Pete Hegseth and company have reduced that down to thirty-one, twenty-one of which are variants of Christianity.

I know you're thinking First Amendment, but forget that. It's the Second Amendment. It's the only one that matters.

That's a joke if you're a visitor. [laughter]

Amazing. Amazing that in the United States of America there is no First Amendment if you're not a right-wing Christian. And do not think progressive Presbyterians are on their list. I mean, yes, right now, formally Presbyterians are okay, but Unitarians are not. Deists are not. Which means Thomas Jefferson would not be included in the new America. Ben Franklin would be excluded in the new America. That's pretty depressing.

We need a deeper sense of interconnectedness, a deeper sense of our own roots. Because we are children of the cosmos, we go infinitely deeper than what is happening to us in our own place and time. But we forget that. And we float to the surface and despair. So these stories remind us, go deep. When you're feeling hopeless, go deep.

Elijah in the story is so perfect. He says, the country's dishonoring you. I'm the only one left. I'm the only prophet left that understands anything. He would fit really well in today, I think.

I used to, when I was a kid—just to let you know I'm a bad person [laughter]—when I was a kid, I used to watch televangelists in horror. Carnival people and televangelists, I just was astounded. And there was one that I used to listen to that would go in almost every sermon [hoarse voice]: “I sometimes wonder if I'm the only minister preaching in America today who still believes in the gospel message.”

That's Elijah. He's lost it. He's burned out. He's toast. And in the story, God's going to say, "Thank you very much for your service. [laughter] I want to introduce you to your new replacement."

But first, there's a mystical experience that takes place. And this takes place in a cave that has one of the most ancient engravings of the “I Am” sayings. And he's asked to go out, and he says the voice says, the sacred will be there for you. And there's an earthquake. The text says the sacred is not in the earthquake. There's a fire. The sacred is not in the fire. And then there's a small, still voice. And Elijah goes out to meet with the sacred.

We have people in our nation that have lost hope. It's about 30% of the population. They're giving CPR to a cosmology that is obsolete. And it terrifies them. These are not bad people. These are not stupid people. They're not cruel, but they're doing cruel things. And they're doing mindless things.

And so for us to go deeper in our own lives and experience that sacred can help us share it. Religion may not even come to the conversation, but to help people identify that the sacred is still here. What you were taught in Sunday school may not work anymore. But what they were searching for is still right here.

When I call myself a mystic, what I mean is reverence is like at the center of my life. These are my happiest moments. There's countless ways that that's expressed, and every person in this room has their own variation on that. And it's the poverty of the Church that you've not been honored for that. You have some art or some science that puts you in touch with the roots of your being, and you have to realize that just because church people don't see it does not mean that that's not the sacred.

Here's the trick. Truth, goodness, mercy, beauty— they have to be born through us. You're not going to find them fully formed in the world. They have to take birth through you and through your life. But that doesn't start off feeling so good sometimes. Wisdom begins sometimes as a feeling of confusion. And understandably, people panic because they've been told they have to have an answer. And they don't realize that confusion is the answer being born. It is the answer gestating. That our fear is the cradle through which courage is born. When we run from our fear, it follows us like a shadow. When we go into that cave and experience the energy for what it is, it's transformed.

Today we're looking at a text called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It was one of the first mystical writings that I ran across when I was in college. I didn't spend as much time reading what I was supposed to read as I did--. Let me read the piece again because I'd never heard anything like this before:

When I say darkness—

And remember, darkness is not evil to a mystic, Darkness is the source, the roots of the light. You can't separate the two.

When I say darkness, I mean privation of knowing, just as whatever you do not know or have forgotten is dark to you because you do not see it with your spiritual eyes. For this reason, that which is between you and your God is termed not a cloud of the air, but a cloud of unknowing.

That fog that we hate so much is the birthplace of the mystic. And there's not a person in this room that hasn't experienced their own version of that.

I one time saw somebody talking about this experience of—. There are things we have to know through our body or we don't know them at all. I was taught a Christianity that was all words. It was all answers, and they didn't want to hear the questions. So the answers I was taught were the questions I wasn't even asking. But I don't care—fully human, fully divine—that was not on my worry list.

The image comes from back when they used to look at slides. Some of my happiest moments were watching slides of my relatives. But what they said was, when the slides are out of focus, all the information is still there, but you can't see what it is yet. In those moments of intense,

throbbing emotions, something is being born inside you. And there's an art in learning. To honor that and then not shut it down, because we can do that too.

So that's the first thing. And to realize the tie that I hope binds us all together is that faith is not holding onto your belief of God. Faith is trusting the life process working through your life. It's trusting that change. Because if we hate change, we're in a world of trouble, because that's what life is. When we go through dramatic change, even if it's change we want, it makes us sad. We have to grieve it.

A lot of what's happening in the country is because things have changed so much that many people in this country don't have the tools. I was able to go to college, so I learned Big Bang, all that kind of stuff. But if I was working on a tractor all day long, I may not have had the bandwidth to get to that. I can't have contempt for somebody who didn't have the privilege that I had. I have to respond to the humanity that's there.

People look mean. They may look stupid. But that's not what's happening. Good people are short-circuiting.

Pema Chödrön—am I saying that right?---said:

To be alive and fully human and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest.

That's pretty good.

Have you ever played solitaire with all the cards facing down? No, nobody. [laughter] What a boring game it would be. Can we have that attitude with our lives, that what we don't know is what makes life interesting? Have you ever been to a movie with somebody who'd already seen it and ruined it for you? [laughter] Think about that. Sometimes it's what you don't know that makes it an adventure. You're there at the movie theater and the person leans over and says, "Don't get attached to that guy." [laughter]

Realize that what can be a very unpleasant emotional state, if we will affirm it, if we will listen to it, can be the best teacher we have. Confusion is in some ways the ultimate in creativity. It's your entire body reprocessing your worldview.

The third and final thing that I want to point out from the story is it says that there's an earthquake and the sacred wasn't in the earthquake. There was fire and the sacred wasn't in the fire. If magic works for you, I'm not trying to take away anything. But if we want to love nature, then we can find the sacred there. We don't need magical beings. The people you know and love, the animals you know and love, are all the revelation you need.

Elijah hears a small, still voice. And again, I think that rustling of the soul when it realizes that our sense impressions are only the surface of reality, that there's something that transcends our

world. But you can't make an object of it. If your symbol of God becomes an object, a physical person, it's going to look more like some people than it looks like other people. And you're going to be in a world of hurt when life doesn't work out for you, and you have to try to explain in your mind why that all-loving being is treating you that way.

The small, still voice is that whisper we hear when we look at the stars. It's that stirring we feel when we're at the ocean, and we realize that our lives are bigger than we realize and our vessels are very temporary and small. It's both scary and euphoric.

I'm going to read—and this may be a mistake—this is passage from the early church. As soon as I got to seminary, I started reading the early church, and they were so much smarter than anybody I studied in seminary. If you don't believe me, go to a store that has what's called the Ante-Nicene writings from the early church before Nicaea, before the creeds. And just look at the index. Plato, Heraclitus, different religions of the world.

These were incredible people, but they also knew if they were going to teach people, they had to downscale. They had to put it in stories or they were going to leave people behind. Listen to this paragraph from Pope Dionysius. He's talking about the Trinity, and you get a sense that what they're trying to do with the symbols is get beyond the limits of our sense perceptions. See if you agree. He says:

Trinity, higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness.

It's greater than even our idea of God.

Guide of Christians and the wisdom of heaven, lead us up beyond unknowing and light to the farthest highest peak of mystic scripture where the mysteries of God's word lie simple, absolute, and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence. Amid the deepest shadow, they pour overwhelmingly light on what is most manifest. Amid the holy, unsensed, and unseen, they completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond all beauty.

So people realized—the mystics realized that darkness is just as important as light. The things that we can't see are just as important as what we can see.

I think Van Gogh maybe said it a little bit better, or easier, put like that. He said:

For my part, I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream.

That's that small, still voice. Something stirs inside you that's expressed with art. And you're not seeing it, but you're sensing it. You're intuiting it, that there's something deeper, something more basic.

One more quote, and then I'll leave you alone on those. This is Sue Monk Kidd:

What has happened to our ability to dwell in the unknowing, to live inside the question and coexist with the tensions of uncertainty? Where is our willingness to incubate pain and let it birth something new? What has happened to patient unfolding, to endurance? These things are what form the ground of waiting.

Let me see if I can tie this up in a bow. Probably not, but we live in a time when, like Elijah, there are people trying to get back to something they feel like they've lost. And they're giving CPR to a God that's not coming back.

What the prophets told Israel is God is doing something new. God is in the future, not in the past. And to get there, you have to blossom, you have to grow.

Next time you go into that emotional state of confusion, can you see it as a cloud of unknowing? Can you let go of your idea of what the sacred is and honor the process of the sacred in your life in the here and now? Can you listen to that small, still voice in whatever form it takes for you?

I close with one more quote, a Chinese proverb: *"When the winds of change blow, foolish people build walls, wise people build windmills."*

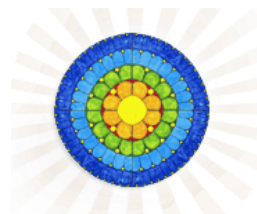
I will leave you now to your own thoughts on this. We'll take a minute for you to think about your own understanding of these words.

Benediction

Rev. Erica Knisely

Be still. Bear with the confusion and the discomfort. Trust the process of transformation happening within you already. It is precisely in these moments that fear is being changed into courage, pain and hatred into love, and confusion into wisdom. May you allow the Sacred to be born in and through you. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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