Close Encounters of the Divine Kind  
Matthew 1:18-24

Each December we are reminded of Joseph and Mary’s unique encounter with God. In truth, their experience is only one example of what many Biblical characters have witnessed – a Close Encounter of the Divine Kind. A partial list includes:

- Abraham entertaining the three angelic visitors,
- Jacob’s dream at Bethel in which angels ascend and descend a ladder,
- Moses and the Burning Bush,
- Solomon talking with God within a dream,
- Isaiah’s vision of the Seraphim purifying his lips with a hot coal,
- The apostle Peter’s vision of the white sheet filled with unclean animals,
- Paul’s dramatic conversion on the Road to Damascus.

After reviewing these divine encounters, I’ve identified some common threads within these stories.

For beginners, these persons weren’t seeking out God’s presence. They weren’t engaged in prayer or any other spiritual practice. They weren’t asking God to use them in a special way. Rather, God breaks into their lives unexpected.

That’s usually how God operates. It’s not according to our timetable. It’s not within our particular parameters. Our most profound experience of God typically occurs at the most unexpected time or place: in the midst of a conversation, sitting quietly in nature, listening to music, or perhaps in a dream. These are times when our defenses are down, when we’re giving very little thought to ourselves, when we are most vulnerable.

Secondly, with the exception of King Solomon, no one would have predicted the Divine to have selected these individuals for such a Divine Encounter. In truth, they were perhaps the very last persons that the community would have selected. Why?

- Jacob was considered a liar and a cheat,
- Moses had murdered an Egyptian and wasn’t comfortable with public speaking,
- Peter had denied Jesus three times,
- Paul had once persecuted the Christian community,
- Mary was an unwed peasant,
- Joseph was a simple carpenter.

Encounters with God are not reserved for the rich and famous, the well-educated, nor the super religious. All that is required is an open and willing heart.
That is the ultimate purpose of prayer and any of the spiritual practices – not to coax God into granting an appearance – but to let go of all the demands and distractions that life presents and to learn to be totally receptive.

These Divine Encounters are filled with joy and bliss, but let’s be clear; there’s a less appealing aspect of getting up close and personal with the Holy – being called to act in a new and challenging way.

- Moses was called to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt.
- Jacob was led toward reconciliation with his brother.
- Isaiah had the thankless job of speaking words of judgment that no one wanted to hear.
- Peter and Paul endured imprisonment and beatings for proclaiming the gospel.
- Joseph and Mary were given the responsibility of nurturing their son so that he could convey to the world a new message about God.
- Following his mystical baptism, with the Holy Spirit descending upon him like a dove, Jesus was immediately driven into the wilderness.

We all want the comfort and joy that may come with a Holy Encounter, but few of us want to be led into challenging circumstances. We know that the demands are likely to be high and question our abilities for fulfilling the task.

One thing we notice throughout the scriptures is that what God calls us to do, God also equips us to do. And often, the greatest source of the strength and courage we seek is the reassurance of God’s abiding presence. Although God offers this reassurance throughout the pages of the Bible, we seem to hear it the loudest at Christmastime with the proclamation of Emmanuel – God is with us!

As far as providing us an example of what it means to live within the reality of that promise, no one can match the life of Jesus. He was constantly aware of God’s presence all around him and sought to convince others of that same reality.

Christmas is much more than remembering the birth of Jesus thousands of years ago. It also recognizes the distinct possibility that God just may break into our lives unexpectedly, calling us to become living expressions of God’s grace and love in this world.

Rev. Phillip Myers
First Reformed UCC
December 1, 2013