

Freedom

I moved to Albuquerque thinking that it was going to be a short-term solution to being jobless. I would be separated from my family a year, maybe a year and a half total. I convinced myself that I would be able to move back and forth and visit my family quite easily. It would pay for our bills and I would feel like I was contributing to our family after being without work for so long.

I was wrong on a few counts. It was virtually impossible to go back and forth to visit during that year and a half. I was incredibly lonely. I felt intense guilt for leaving. I was alone. I was not only alone, but I was in the middle of the desert alone.

I can't explain the desert to you if you have never seen it. It is not hard to understand why it is a spiritual place for so many people, why it is the place Jesus was taken by the Spirit to pray. There is a desolation that you might only find if you were trapped on an island. Yet, the brilliance of colors and light was like nothing I had ever encountered. The beauty in this dead place was something I was totally unprepared.

I started to look back up old Georgia O'Keefe paintings that I had once seen at the Art Institute of Chicago and realized that I had never really seen them in the way that she had meant them to be noticed. She was trying in a failed attempt to capture the incredibly breathtaking colors that surrounded her in Northern New Mexico's desert. It was like I saw them again for the first time.

I will admit that even though I can see the purpose for that time in my life, I can also say that it was an incredibly difficult time for me personally. I felt like my career was over, that I had gone to the end of the road with ministry. I had no idea what to do next in life. I was so burned by the Justice work that I had done for the denomination and

felt completely abandoned by it. There are times when ministry is drudgery, I know, but this was deeper. I felt burned up, consumed by my own failings in ministry. This seemed to me so disorienting because I felt I had accomplished so much, but could only see so many mistakes and missteps.

For years my creative outlet had been in the writing of poems for my own private edification, but I had recently been to visit an art gallery in which they showed a technique for doing monotype prints on Styrofoam. I was transfixed. They gave us one plate and a stylist to make a design. They pressed it through an elaborate press and presto, my design was printed.

I talked for a half an hour with that artist while Calla and Carol looked around the gallery. I could purchase the Styrofoam plates through a printing company, the ink was a special printing ink, I could purchase a nice set of stylists at a local art supply store, and the press was the most expensive item. I was sad that something that gave me so much joy cost so much money to do. I concluded that Art is expensive.

After thinking about it for a long time I realized something that changed my perspective. I didn't have to buy most of that stuff. So much of the crap we buy to eat was packaged in Styrofoam, anything could be a stylist, and I could use any type of paper. The only thing I needed was ink. So, I was off to the art store in Chattanooga to look for ink. I found that cheap silkscreen printing ink would do the trick. So, I started my time as an amateur printer.

I had taken my ink with me to Albuquerque, and realized that I needed this outlet of art to do something positive in the midst of my mind's negativity. I put all the ink out on the dining room folding table, and wondered where I would find the rest of my stuff for my art? So, I did what any normal person would do, I started dumpster diving (for the

uninitiated this means going through business' trash dumpsters). Soon I had gathered Styrofoam, stylists, and had found a stash of blank postcards. I was ready.

I attempted during that time to recreate the colors and stark beauty that I observed. I knew I was no Georgia O'Keefe, but I wanted to at least try to recreate the nature beauty surrounding me. Soon I had a small stack of postcards with moons, lone trees, hills, and sunsets. I began sending these postcards through our national treasure the post office to friends and my family. I knew they could not see what I was seeing, but I wanted them to share something important to me in the midst of my own despair, hope, and loneliness.

Today we are confronted by the same deity that Moses encountered so many years ago in his own desert. He was an orphan, a sheep herder, a murderer, a fugitive, and a person who could not speak well. Yet, he was chosen by the creator to be the one that God revealed the liberation of Israel. Moses was chosen to lead God's people out of slavery.

This first encounter with the divine is instructive to each and every time that Moses encounters the divine. A bush on fire that never is consumed. Take off your shoes this is holy ground. Who are you? I am who I am.

Moses will be given the unenviable task of attempting to explain this God to enemies and God's own people. It is not any wonder that they eventually want to make an idol, something that is easy to see, something that is easy to explain.

It is much easier to say what this God wants, what the people are to do, than it is for Moses to explain what he has encountered. Anything that he would try would only be a sliver, a scant portion of what entered his

retina and into the synapses of his brain. There would be no way Moses could do God justice. He stood in the mist of the people of Israel either showing a sign or his head glowing so much that a bag had to be put over his face.

Always be suspicious of those who believe that they can explain in detail the ineffable, the one who is certain, the one who has an easy answer to every mystery. If God were explainable that would mean that the divine was reproducible. Then God would be too small, too pedestrian, too provincial. Just like those prints I made, they would be a scant recreation of what my eyes could observe.

Never attempt to finish the impossible sentence "God is...". Just when you finish it then God will become much more than you could ever describe. God is free to be whatever God wants to be. Thanks be to that God.