Seeing As We Are

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After being driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, for forty days, Jesus prayed and fasted. Now that he'd finally heard his heavenly father adopting him, his imagination was filled with temptations: time to work miracles, time to amaze people, time to be the Son of God. But fortunately, his better angels won out, and by the end of his quest, he was ready.

Steven Charleston calls it Jesus' first vision quest. The second would be his transfiguration on the mountain. His third was bargaining with the father in Gethsemane garden. And the fourth vision quest of Jesus was seeing the women accompany him to the cross, to the tomb, and at his resurrection.

Native American traditions teach that people can receive visions from the Spirit world to guide their future lives. Jesus spent his forty days alone, making sense of what the dove meant when she descended on him. What the voice wanted him to be, now that he'd been adopted as a son of the well-pleased God.

But he wasn't alone: another voice joined him in the wilderness: *Now that you know for sure you're the Son of God, think of all the great things you're going to do! Now of course, fasting is a very holy thing to do, and people will be very impressed, but they'll never know if you just turned one of these stones here into a nice, warm loaf of bread, hot from the oven. Right? Obviously the son of the great Adonai, Ha Shem–dare I say "Yahweh"?--Obviously you've got it in you to do anything you want.*

No? Okay, cool, seems un-sporting, I get it. How about this: pretty soon, after you go home to Galilee and gather your army, you march on Jerusalem. You're also the Son of David, remember. That's what HE did. That's HIS town! And so, when you get to Jerusalem, you can get your new friends, the angels, to help you climb to the pinnacle of the Temple. And then: you JUMP! The crowd will gasp, thinking you're going to die! But you're never going to die. You're the Messiah! That would ruin everything, so it'll be just like in David's song: 'the angels will bear you up lest you dash your foot on a stone!' And people will start worshiping you. Like they should.

Jesus' first vision quest–the temptations in the desert–was all about his ego. He was going to be the greatest human being ever. How was he going to show everyone?

He wasn't alone out there. The Spirit was still around, watching. And the angels were there, who might even be jealous of us humans with our free will. We get to choose to do God's will, or not to.. And of course, Satan the tempter was right there. Not a nasty red devil with a pitchfork and fire, but God's old rival, the great salesperson, peddling fun and fame and a million shortcuts. And the wild animals were there too, not like the nice animals in the barn in Bethlehem. Predators. Untamed.

My own vision, if it even was a vision, was a lot tamer. It happened in church, at the end of a terrific sermon by a priest I admired. At a lonely time in my life, when I was giving up on living the life my parents had offered me, trying to figure out what to do for a living instead. Trying to figure out who I was, really, because I'd always known who other people needed me to be.

I'm *still* trying to figure that out. My personality type on the Enneagram is a two, the helper, and I can easily be manipulated by someone needy. I'm slow to figure out what I actually want, and too quick to intuit what other people need. So of course I became a priest. And a teacher. And a dad and a grandpa and a volunteer handyman and the guy who makes dinner.

Anyway, my own vision featured two golden angels and Jesus himself, in a mosaic behind the altar at the church that would later send me off to seminary. The preacher ended her sermon with the promise that Jesus was waiting there for us, "on the other side of silence." Which I took as reassurance that, although I felt alone and aimless, I shouldn't give up or settle for someone else's answers. That silence is golden. That I needed to be patient. My mother was good at patience. I'm not.

I didn't experience this moment as a vision at the time. It didn't feel dramatic. When you're depressed, everything feels dull.

Now as for Jesus and his vision quests, it took a Choctaw elder, the Episcopal clergyperson Steven Charleston to see these four events in the life of Jesus as a series of vision quests. A man familiar with sweat lodges, and fasting on holy mountains, from a people who know what it means to lament because the end of the world has already happened to them. Maybe only an indigenous

guy could see John the Baptist as a sacred clown, or understand Jesus' prayers in the garden of Gethsemane as bartering with God. There's an old saying that we do not see things as they are. We can only see them as we are. And so Steven Charleston blesses us with a book about Jesus as only he could see.

We don't see Jesus as he was. We see him as we are. Peter the former fisherman described baptism as a rescue. Jesus called Simon from life on the water and changed his name to Peter, the Rock. Baptism, Peter writes, is like God rescuing Noah and his family.

Or when Dame Julian–who treated everyone in Norwich like they were her children–she described Jesus as our nurturing mother. She saw him as she was.

When we talk about following Jesus, it's subjective. He's the brother, the healer, the teacher, the disruptor, the mysterious traveler, the footwasher, the miracle-worker.

The Jesus of history was a Jewish builder turned rabbi and faith-healer. A religious reformer. The Christ of faith is the hero of the New Testament and thousands of traditions. What we learn about him from Scripture and from what others tell us, plus whatever we discover on our own, that's the Jesus we honor by living like him. Or at least trying to.

Steve Charleston wonders if maybe the incarnation was God's vision quest. Taking on a human body and mind was God struggling to see more subjectively, like we do.

Jesus' famous Golden Rule is subjective: treat others as you'd want to be treated. But what if you don't treat yourself very well? Since we don't see others as they are, but only as we are, Jesus also gave us the Platinum Rule: love one another as God has loved you. It's less subjective.

Maybe there's no such thing as objectivity, but seeing with the all-loving subjectivity of God is as beautiful a way of seeing things as we can manage. Seeing things as they are is probably impossible, but trying to see as God sees is the most important work we can have.