**On God, Jesus, and Netflix**

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LENT 2

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I spent the last week bingewatching Netflix while recovering from COVID. I blasted through most of the five seasons of Greenleaf.

Greenleaf follows the world of the Greenleaf family and their Memphis megachurch with predominantly African American members. The Greenleafs hold multitudes of secrets and lies from adultery, tax evasion, sibling rivalry and beyond. love and hate each other with equal amounts of wonder and venom. It is not unusual while hiding a marital affair or some other betrayal to see a character reading their Bible in bed, or praying for guidance. At the core of their identity they are bible believing Christians, and you find yourself both cheering for them and shaking your head at their scandalous behaviors. Such delicious drama.

I love theology played out across the screen. Theology, the study of God and religious belief, whether in the movies or the halls of academia, never gets old. It is one of humanity’s core endeavors, in all cultures and time.

When Mark and I conceived of this preaching series around progressive theology, we looked at Bishop John Shelby Spong’s last published book, *Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today (2018).* We spent a few forums with Larry Anderson discussing the 12 tenets of this book right after the pandemic.

In an interview, Spong related his goal in writing his last book:   
*“I tried to develop a crucial distinction between the Christ experience and the Christ explanation. The experience is real and timeless; the explanation must be surrendered….The Incarnation, the virgin birth, resuscitation as the meaning of resurrection and the concept of the Holy Trinity-all are explanations that will never last..[these]explanations have to die, but the experience remains eternal. This includes….the idea of God as a personal Deity, or theism, is outdated.”*

While I affirm much of Spong’s ideas, I think it’s essential to notice that his studies were bound in the ideas of Western European Christianity, which is steeped in imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchy, rooted in his own context of Episcopalianism. This isn’t necessarily WRONG, but rather unfortunate—to me. There is little acknowledgement of the freeing and groundbreaking revelations brought forth in ecofeminist theology, womanist theology, black theology, queer theology~~rich emancipating conversations happening at the margins that could have informed his own vast canon of writings. That being said, his accessible writings outside the tomes of academia have been an enlightening “balm in gilead” for those wrestling with western, white Christian identity.

So let’s talk about theism. While there are many strands of theism, a decent working definition is “belief in the existence of a god or gods, especially belief in one god as creator of the universe, [intervening](https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&sa=X&sca_esv=5112c3a901f3f3de&rls=en&biw=1344&bih=753&q=intervening&si=APYL9btEN2SiQ9h4o5Ckf6vYFXRYpue4RK5o-O2Nhz2WWU_2o3WqP89u-iLkBP7qENTM7HH0EUdvuFDvA9XqEu6Fe7DVgQZOMZxAFEM2bO756T8Zo02oBqU%3D&expnd=1&ved=2ahUKEwibirKcmIWMAxUyl-4BHUDwHZcQyecJegQIPxAP) in it and [sustaining](https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&sa=X&sca_esv=5112c3a901f3f3de&rls=en&biw=1344&bih=753&q=sustaining&si=APYL9bsHRxpYwvvSTGj17LkMtmwDqEGz5S9NRoh8y69kHjTUoRXJ04IzI0nbDOnJk11VXbOvhMXFMYZsHWMVnSVZDNwxQdOUcMV3depxWfjtV-i7xjIegs8%3D&expnd=1&ved=2ahUKEwibirKcmIWMAxUyl-4BHUDwHZcQyecJegQIPxAQ) a personal relation to their creatures.”

Spong effectively summarizes scientific discoveries from the Renaissance to Enlightenment and how they challenged the prevailing views of a human centered universe and divine intervention in the world. This trend was interpreted as a “shrinking space for God” within scientific communities.

It must be acknowledged, however, that even Copernicus, Newton, and Darwin were all church-men. Even Darwin himself, steeped in Unitarianism and Anglicanism, ended up an agnostic. The word does not suggest disbelief so much as a fundamental uncertainty about questions such as the existence and nature of God.

In the end, Spong believed the concept of God as a supernatural, theistic being is "no longer believable". Spong sought a third way between theism and atheism, where individuals are not separated from God but instead are "part of what God is" and "at one with all that God is".  God is “experience”….and often Spong used the phrase “Ground of All Being” to describe the “god” experience.

He says, “I don’t think God can ever be explained or defined. God can only be experienced, and then you never quite know what you’re experiencing — but you have a sense of transcendence, of otherness, of a surging power of life, of the meaning of love…. Then you have to wonder if ….[there is] a reality out there that [we can] ~~…~~.tap into and commune with. I think there is; that’s why I’m a Christian. But it’s not going to be an old man in the sky who is going to do a miracle. I’ve got to find a whole new way to talk about the God experience

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My new best TV friends, the Greenleafs, would not necessarily disagree with this idea of experiencing God. However, their theology is definitely aligned with the idea of God being intimately and personally involved, especially with THEIR individual lives. Bishop Greenleaf describes humans as “as God’s Bowling Pins. He made us to stand back up again!” First Lady and Pastor Mae fasts until God **tells** her not to.

As you might expect, The Greenleafs also are big into Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior who died for all those guilty people to wash away their sins. The invitation is always open to pray the “sinners prayer” I will say that I appreciate the way the Greenleafs affirm their faith with a newfound grandson, AJ, that is the product of a steamy affair of their daughter Grace. They welcome him into the family, and the Bishop talks to him about being saved, but never pushes it. AJ finally has his “conversion” moment, but it happens on his own terms, for his own reasons.

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Spong has written books about Jesus and again, with grounding in the God experience, he writes, “The God experience in Jesus is seen in the fullness of his life and his infinite capacity to love and give his life away. There’s something about him that brings God to us, and that makes a lot of sense to me.”

So what about the gospels and Jesus? It is essential we remember that the Gospels, the NT books that tell stories of Jesus—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are NOT historical or biographical documents. Spong calls them liturgical documents that were “designed to enable the Christian community, who were still Jews, to tell Jesus’ stories against the background of hte scripture lessons read in the synagogue, and that happened over and over and over again for about 40 years before the first of the Gospels was finally written.”

This is essential~~the Gospels were amalgations pieced together from oral traditions that emerged from the synagogue. The Jesus story is best understood through a first century Jewish lens. I also believe the Jesus story is best heard through the contemporary lens of theology done from the margins~~womanist, black, eco, queer, mujerista and other liberation theologies. That’s my next sermon.

God, Jesus, and Netflix….and progressive Christianity. When we “do” theology, it is essential to humbly acknowledge we are dealing with mystery. Or, as a fourth grade boy told me, “God is….just….ineffable.” With Spong, I think it is incredibly difficult to “define” God.

The best definition of God in the Bible comes from the Burning Bush story, where a reluctant Moses is trying to get out of leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. An insecure Moses asks the talking burning bush, knowing the people will want to know under whose authority he is working, “Who do I say sent me?” And the Ineffable Mystery quips, “tell them ‘I Am Who I Am’ sent you. I am who I am, or I will be who I will be, or I am being who I am being~~the sacred “name” of God is the verb of Being.

Is God intimately involved in our lives? Ineffable Mystery? Yes, no, maybe so? I haven’t heard God speak with a human voice out of the nothingness, but people swear it happens. Even the erudite Diana Butler Bass (another former Ashely Lecturer) writes of mystical experience of the voice of God when she was praying in a chapel. Does God find me a parking space or bless me with riches because I am faithful? Ummmm, no. BUT, I can say I experience God intimately involved in my life. Personally, I might talk to Jesus, but I don’t pray TO Jesus as “god”. But that’s just me. I adore the Jesus in the Bible. A lot of people DO pray to Jesus, they praise Jesus, and then a lot of people pray to Mary, and a lot of people pray to their own mothers or a pantheon of ancestors.

Here is the thing. With such a holy myriad of belief and experience of the Holy in this world, I want to draw as deeply from as many as I can~~as long as LOVE is the guiding metric in my spiritual life.

I want to go back to my dear Greenleafs. I am not a fan of the “sinners prayer” or atonement theology. We will talk more about that later. I do not read my Bible in bed, searching for answer to my problems and I do not appreciate the “prosperity” gospel. As a family of bishops and pastors and church leaders, I am gobsmacked at how hateful and jealous and mean spirited they are to one another. The Greenleafs are professional back stabbers! I know, it’s a made for night-time tv soap opera.

But in the end, their messy faith in God is what saves each of them from n totally spiraling into evil. In spite of their betrayals and contradictions, their faith was a slow constant beat where somehow gentle grace abided and abounded. They were terrible, and yet knew they were beloved. It doesn’t get better than that: The story of a flawed people seeking liberation, seeking love, imperfectly with sharp edges and constant failings~~it’s actually Biblical! The story of extravagant and reckless Love.

And may it be so for us, as travelers on a journey, imperfect, human, messy, kind and selfish. We live in a connection to something transcendent and earthy, a heartbeat of Love that seeks to hold us in spite of ourselves and because of all of who we are—Beloved. Amen

**Source Links**

candace chellew, whosever, arch 1, 2008, interview with Bishop John Shelby Spong, <https://whosoever.org/bishop-john-shelby-spong-rescuing-jesus-from-religion-interview/>

<https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/augustus_religion.html>

<https://sojo.net/articles/liberating-theology-transformed-my-understanding-god#:~:text=>

<https://whosoever.org/bishop-john-shelby-spong-rescuing-jesus-from-religion-interview/>