

Exodus 17.7: **“Is the Lord among us or not?”**

Mother Julian of Norwich, as she became, lived in turbulent times. In her fifth year, a global pandemic, the Black Death, struck England and within two years wiped out half its population. There were no vaccines in 1348, so no way to overcome this cruel, devastating, and agonizing disease, except for waiting it out, if you were lucky. And that was easier said than done: bubonic plague returned more than once in Julian’s lifetime, picking off many original survivors and adding other victims.

Many people wondered why the pandemic had happened and, seeking answers, disappeared down rabbit holes of conspiracy theories, bad religion, witchcraft, and superstition. Society imploded. Division and hatred characterized the second half of 14th century England, as people gave themselves permission to be their worst selves, abandoning kindness and the social good for self-interest. There weren’t enough people left to work the fields and bring in the harvest. Thievery and violence stalked the countryside, villages, and towns of England. Rich and poor were pitted against each other, which led to a widespread and brutal peasants’ revolt in 1381.

Meanwhile, in her 30th year, Julian became ill of an unknown disease, possibly the plague, received the last rites from a curate, and... recovered. As the curate held a crucifix above the foot of her bed, she began to lose her sight and feel physically numb but gazing on the crucifix she saw the figure of Jesus begin to bleed. Over the next several hours, she had a series of fifteen visions of Jesus, and a sixteenth the following night.

She became an anchoress, living in a cell with just one servant, dedicated to prayer and to the writing up of her visions, or “showings”, as she called them. She was famous throughout the land for her holiness, so many people, devastated by the world of pain, loss, and despair in which they lived, sought her out, fascinated by and drawn into her witness that, despite all appearances to the contrary, God is, hope endures, and the mystery of love

is not quenched. In that most bleak, chaotic and toxic of centuries, Mother Julian wrote, more than once that: "All will be well".

She could, of course, have been completely deluded.

When I was a young man, a few years after Mother Julian's life, and about to become a History major, the Austrian-born American sociologist of religion Peter Berger wrote a book called A Rumor of Angels. He contended that, although the modern western world has become largely secularized, with religion in society marginal and private, there are signals of transcendence all around us. We just have to be open to them, to the possibility that there is a rumor of angels.

Those who know me understand that my view of the social sciences is one of modified rapture. But... as I've thought on Berger's insight and read the mystics of the world's religions, I note that if, despite all appearances and evidence to the contrary, you treat the world as friendly, sprinkled with the stardust of divine grace, you can conclude that: all will be well.

I might, of course, be completely deluded, even utterly bonkers. Global pandemics, that almost always unleash human stupidity and cupidity into a hurting and dazed world, are just one barrier to a belief in divine goodness and human kindness. Personal tragedies and natural disasters: likewise. And many other things.

And yet. It's the signals of transcendence, the rumor of angels, that keeps alive the possibility of divine grace in a broken world.

"Is the Lord among us or not?" Over three thousand years ago, the Hebrews were wandering the Sinai desert, and had been for some time. Moses had told them that the Lord had a plan for them, releasing them out of bondage in Egypt and promising them a land flowing with milk and honey. But meanwhile: sand. And thirst, because of no water. So, the people's anger kindled against Moses and God. They'd hoped for a brave new world not sand dunes and raging thirst. God acted, and the gift of water became, for

the wandering Hebrews, a signal of transcendence, a pledge that all will be well.

Moses and Mother Julian inhabited worlds that, although two millennia apart, sheltered under a sacred canopy. For them, the divine was mysterious and elusive, to be sure, but taken for granted as an all-consuming reality. We don't live in a world like that. We don't expect God to share our desert experiences or to be present in our dreams. We don't look for miracles. Our view of reality is, for better and worse, different.

And yet... maybe signals of transcendence lighten up even our world and make it a place more mysterious and even friendly than we thought.

Long years ago, my Indian 'other mother' asked me, when she died, to visit one of her daughters, to whom I was and am close, and who lives far from India. I imagine she thought, quite rightly, that we could comfort each other at her loss. I agreed but was troubled because, in those days, I lived on another continent and was completely broke. Where the airfare was coming from was beyond my imagining. Yet when she died, I was, by chance, staying with that daughter, my first visit for a long while. Chance? Or a signal of transcendence, a rumor of angels?

In 2010, I was woken up early one morning by a phone call from my wife Udho, to tell me that she'd been diagnosed with breast cancer. I was staying in a hotel room in Jerusalem and, by chance, later that morning my group was scheduled to make a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, traditionally the site of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. I knelt there, placed my hands where the body of Jesus is believed to have lain, and let my pain mingle with his and Udho's and turn into, not thanks but wonder and hope.

Another coincidence? Maybe. And yet I've read too many murder mysteries not to know that coincidence is almost always a misfire, often an author's failure to have a grip on their plot, a device that obscures and does not illuminate reality.

So, if not coincidence, were these two events signals of transcendence? If so, there were no fairy tale happy endings. My 'other mother' was dead. And Udho began a long, slow decline into what became suffering and death. Still, these two showings were signals, maybe, of a divine mystery that we can glimpse, and thereby find hope and purpose and the strength to endure. And there's the rub: if, in fact, there are occasional nudges from the Almighty, presumably it's not because God has a cruel sense of humor but rather they're given to light up, momentarily, the darkness of our lives.

'Is the Lord among us or not?' Good question. There's no certainty but instead, perhaps, a rumor of angels.