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Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Linda Booth 0:34

Welcome to the 12th episode of Coffee Buzz, a podcast conversation with a member of Community of Christ First Presidency. My name is Linda Booth, and today I'm talking with Prophet President Steve Veazey, who's preparing for world church leadership council meetings this month. Welcome friend. In one of our earlier Coffee Buzz conversations you mentioned that the world church leadership council was engaged in a discernment process on behalf of the church. Of course, that was pre pandemic when leaders could sit together, worship and deliberate in person. This month, you'll be meeting virtually, Steve, how are leaders? are leaders still in this discernment process? And if so, how's it going in this remote environment?

Steve Veazey 1:28

Yes, we're still involved in the discernment process. And ironically, one of the reasons for engaging in the discernment process is to explore together the future of the church in a time of dynamic, global change, accelerating change in many ways throughout the world. And so just after we began the process, the world began changing in some very dramatic ways because of the pandemic and, and related impact. So amid exploring how to be the church, in a rapidly changing world of the future, everything around us began to rapidly change. And so we did move the discernment process to one that occurs remotely. And just to get a sense of that, we have people participating who are world church leaders who live around the world. And and we communicate with each other in at least three languages, as we're engaged in that discernment process. Of course, one of the outcomes of that whole experience is we recognize that the use of technology online ministries will need to continue to be very much a part of the church's life going forward, even beyond the pandemic. So I think that's been one of the impacts that has revealed possibility for the future. I think the process is going well. We're learning time tested spiritual discernment practices and applying them in our individual spiritual formation, as well as learning how to discern as a group of servant leaders and and that has its own aspects of challenge and needing to be patient in the midst of the process. Right now we're moving beyond just our own reflections. And we're engaged in analysis of our various contacts and our contexts in the world, and also listening deeply to others from various aspects of the church's life and ministry, to hear what they have to say how they would respond to our central discernment question, which is, God, where is your spirit leading us next as we embody the soul of Community of Christ? We'll meet again in a week or so, and I look forward to the insights that will be brought to our discernment process.

Linda Booth 4:52

It's good to be reminded that God is leading church leaders and that God is with us, especially during this time Coronavirus frustratingly difficult time. A friend of mine recently described her

experience of dealing with COVID-19 impact as the dark night of the soul. And that's an old term that comes from a 14th century poem by St. John of the cross, when he described his spiritual crisis in his journey toward union with God, and for him, it was like a dark night of the soul. Even though we're people of faith during our lifetimes, we may encounter a spiritual crisis when we question if there is a God or experience a dark night of the soul. When God seems remote or so far away. It may feel like our faith has dried up or we're just stuck wandering in a spiritual desert. And we may stop praying or even if we're praying it may feel like God's not listening or as abandon us. And as Christians, we don't like to admit to one another that we have these dark nights or desert times when we're struggling with life and feeling separate from God. And we may even believe that if we commit our lives to Jesus Christ in our journey will be all light and sweet smelling roses. But after serving over 22 years as an apostle and Community of Christ, I admit that on several occasions, I have had brief or prolonged desert experiences when I have felt loneliness, disconnected, discouraged and empty. It was like there was a deafening silence between me and God. My prayer seemed empty and even scriptures became a blur. Steve, perhaps I'm putting you on the spot. But have you ever experienced one of these spiritual dry spells And if so, what was that experience like for you?

Steve Veazey 7:06

Oh, well, yes, I certainly have experienced what I hear you describing, and I've had those kinds of experiences, as I think you also alluded to, in varying degrees of intensity and duration. In fact, I think that's a real important point for us as we begin to explore this topic. During our life long spiritual journeys and and quest for what the mystics call true union with God. We may have all kinds of disruptions. It's not just a linear, sequential scheduled journey towards Some destination. There can be dry spells, there can be wandering times. We may have periods of doubt about whether there is a God or what is God really? Like? We may certainly have we do have life disruptions and transitions that can cause disappointment and pain, emptiness and and worry. We may and certainly will have times when we recognize that despite achieving a lot of what we've pursued in life that we thought would bring happiness, happiness has not come to stay. And so we're left with that sense of emptiness and yearning still In addition to that, I don't mean to discourage folks, we may have. In addition to all of that stuff of life, we may have, as you've referenced with the ancient Christian mystics called the dark night, or the dark night of the soul. And the dark night of the soul may actually be more intense, more prolonged period of time during which we feel lost and lonely, hollow and disconnected. I was reading just the other day, where for many years of her life, Mother Teresa really felt disconnected from God. Yes, she yearned for God and continue to serve. So to be realistic, that can occur in our spiritual journey. And it feels for a time like we've even been abandoned by God, or by God, that we are by the God that we think we know. Or by the God that we think we believe in. Some people describe it as with words, like the symptoms of depression, but it's not really depression in the clinical sense or in the mental seeds. It's a time of possible significant spiritual transformation and growth. And that's the perspective that we need to keep as we think about or our are passing through times that fit the definition of the dark side of the soul.

Linda Booth 11:10

Yeah, desert experience seems to be similar to when people go through it, they're the feelings that we have seemed to be similar and something similar to even with the mystics and even in my own life and you've alluded to it is sometimes we have similar outcomes, because God doesn't cause, I don't believe, the dark time of the soul, but God uses our desert experience to deepen our relationship with God to bring transformation and prepare us for greater service.

Steve Veazey 11:47

Yeah,

Linda Booth 11:48

Yeah. And I think that's really an important part of it. If we can just hang in there that in many times, it's like a preparation for something more In your experience, Steve?

Steve Veazey 12:01

yes, a death definitely if you understand it as a phase in the spiritual journey towards true union, truth, true connection with God and not just as something that has been imposed to test you through suffering, but as a phase necessary aspect of shedding some things in your life in order to find your truest self going forward.

Linda Booth 12:47

Yes. So if you and I've experienced desert times, I'm pretty sure that some if not all of our listeners have as well and the stresses and hardships caused by the coronavirus pandemic may make things seem even worse, which could cause us to ask "Where is God and all this suffering?" Steve, what do you do when you find yourself in a spiritual drought? Do you have some suggestions for those who may be in that situation now?

Steve Veazey 13:24

Well for me in times of spiritual drought, I find solace and hope and meaning in the realization that scripture is full of descriptions and accounts of such times in the lives of people of faith, including and especially Jesus Christ. When scripture talks about extended time in a desert, or in the wilderness, it's not just describing a geographic location where where people were living or journeying. It's at the, it's talking about a time of spiritual refinement, of spiritual focusing, of reaching for spiritual clarity. And so a time of difficult trial or pain in our lives can be such a time for us to if we allow it to be so I keep that understanding in mind. I don't like trying times in my humanness, but I keep that understanding in mind as part of the spiritual journey. And again, I've also been struck by studying the words of the mystics, who have a lot of insight into this spiritual phase that we call the dark mind or dark night of the soul and it is a time of spiritual transformation. It feels painful and lonely, because it is a time something in us is die. However, what dying is not our true self, what is dying is our ego that wants to control and be in the center of everything. And and the ego is at the center of the outward person that we have become as we have tried to find security and happiness and, and some sense of peace through our achievements, our career, our titles, our relationships, our material things, and so forth. And so the dark night of the soul is a time of the ego needing to step back, or us finding ways to manage the ego or diminish even the the power of the ego within our lives, which in turn can

feel like the collapse of what we have become, at least outwardly. But what really is happening is that we are shifting from our ego, self serving self and beginning to recognize and open up to our soul or our truest self, which some writers describe as kind of shy, our heart, our truest self, but that is the self that needs to emerge for us to find union with God. And so it's an essential step. When I say step, it can be quite a long process and in some ways, we're always engaged in it. So in the dark night of the soul, our ego becomes very anxious and afraid. And it'll find ways to try to resist the transformation that is, is asking the ego to step back because we need to find ourselves beyond the ego. And this dark night of the soul is pushing us back to the question of who am I really? Yeah, without my career without my title without my achievements without my trophies with without how others have told me I am. It's a time of of truth of honesty with ourselves. And the ego doesn't like that. The ego likes to fix everything internally and externally so that we don't have anxiety and pain and put itself back in control. So that's the struggle that's going on inwardly during the dark night of the soul, but the key to navigating the dark night of the soul is to patiently trust God and the soul to steer things in the right direction. And so the way to cope with it is to be patient with it, to enter into it, to resist blaming others or your circumstances for whatever you're experiencing, to spend more time in spiritual solitude and prayer and meditation, which is a way of ego management. Just like Jesus did when Jesus was in the desert being tempted with ego type, temptation, power and fame and and control. And then as you emerge from this experience, don't just revert back to your old ways of living but incorporate into your life the insights and changes that you've come to see as part of who you are now called to be as your true self, your soul emerges. I've said a whole lot. It's a it's a fascinating topic. As you read the writings of St. John of the cross and others, a part of the dark night of the soul can be a sense of total abandonment from God. But what is happening is not that God has abandoned us, but God has allowed us to sense what human existence would be like without God in our lives. And so all the anxiety and pain and questions and sense of disorientation so that in turn, we may yearn more even more intensely for God in our lives, if that makes sense.

Linda Booth 21:42

It does make sense. And I was just thinking how our Western culture would pull us back from that hard work of soul work, because we don't like anything to take very long and you're right, we do want to be in control. So our work culture

Steve Veazey 22:01

Pulls us away from it.

Linda Booth 22:01

Yeah,

Steve Veazey 22:02

Individualism, the be self dependent, be successful, you know, appear in control that that all works against. So we're also learning how to manage our culture along with our ego.

Linda Booth 22:22

Yes, yes. And culture is such a strength over even our spiritual growth and that journey that God yearns for us to take with God.

Steve Veazey 22:33

Yeah, we're learning how to put all of that in perspective and in its proper place, so we can continue our spiritual journey towards union with God.

Linda Booth 22:46

Yeah. Thanks, Steve for that guidance. Because of this difficult time it's, it's really easy to lose hope and maybe even feel that God has been abandoned this and anyone can go through periods of sadness or challenge that is so deep seated and tenacious, that it can qualify maybe as a dark night of the soul, although what we've been talking about is a little bit different. But as you've pointed out, there are spiritual disciplines or tools that we can use to help us through the hardships of life and even reconnect us with God. I was just reading Facebook posts from a mutual friend Lisa, you know, and Dirk and Dirk had just recently in a serious motorcycle accident. They live down in Louisiana. And after extensive surgery on both of his legs and several weeks in the hospital, Lisa was looking forward to Dirk being transported from the hospital in Shreveport, closer to their home. And then she got some bad news. There was an insurance delay and she was told it would take another 24 to 48 hours for the insurance approval, and Lisa wrote, this broke my wall of strength. But a few hours later, the words of a good friend came to mind. "Look for the face of Jesus and those showing kindness. That face she wrote is the face of tresa. The nurse taking care of my husband. It's the face of Steve his roommate being Dirks legs. It's Frank the insurance man consoling me on the phone after hearing my concerns, and Lisa concluded her post with these words, life may throw us a few setbacks, but we're given other tools to make a strong. Be the face of Jesus today for someone struggling." So Lisa's brief, dark night of the soul experience didn't ultimately steal her faith and God's faithfulness and promises. It actually released a mission challenge to move toward Jesus and embody his mission by being Jesus for others who are also struggling. So you've referred to how God over the years has used moments to get people's attention, like for Moses, the burning bush and Elijah with that still small voice. So God can use these times of dark nights of the soul and desert experiences to get our attention and to get us back on track and point us to Christ's mission. Steve, how do you see God trying to get our attention during the Coronavirus times?

Steve Veazey 25:46

Yeah, I've been reflecting on that a lot lately, because it's the question that a lot of people are asking, as we try to understand and relate our faith. difficult times the age old question why the bad things happen to good people who are trying to do their best in life and in their life of faith? I think first of all, I want to be clear that I don't believe God created or sent the pandemic as some kind of judgment. The pandemic is evidence that we live in an imperfect world in terms of our human existence, and that world includes disease and suffering. Now, we have to add the caveat that that suffering can be made worse or it can be lessened by human behavior. And perhaps that's our first place of insight. We can't control all things, but we are moral agents who've been given the freedom to make choices within the circumstances of our lives. And so

we always need to be asking ourselves what is my role? What is my calling in the midst of difficult times? And I think that's one way. God is always seeking to relate to us. I think theologically, the pandemic can be viewed as a time when we can come to see more clearly our true circumstances. So if we look around us, prayerfully and compassionately we can see that the pandemic is revealing the plight of the poor and disadvantaged in our societies. And that's an important realization if we desire to be about the purposes of God. The people who once again, are being disproportionately negatively impacted by disease, loss of jobs, economic pressure, and the human tendency is to blame them. But we know that God's perspective is be compassionate and do justice. And this is our opportunity to engage in that more fourth rightly. The pandemic is revealing just how much human activity impacts the larger creation and environmental health. So as we have curtailed some activity, we have seen that there's actually a positive effect on the created world, the world that is in addition to our human lives. So it's revealing that it's revealing how quickly we as human beings, politicize situations and issues to try to gain advantage over others, rather than having an instinct that we should pull together and work together to find common solutions with the gifts and resources that God has given us. And so that's an important realization, if we're seeking to align ourselves with the nature and will of God I think it's a time when we can be reminded and called back to the basics of the gospel, like serving the least of these, protecting the vulnerable in our families in our communities, all of which are attitudes and behaviors we need to align ourselves with God's will and purposes. So I think it can be a time of clarity, increased clarity and adjustment of our attitudes and behaviors in the direction of God's will.

Linda Booth 30:43

Yes, yes, definitely. I also believe that God's trying to tell us, "Look, I'm all around you during these difficult times. I'm with you just pay attention." I think a deep dear friend called me a few days ago, Sharon has a neurological disease called multiple systems atrophy, which is shutting down her bodily functions. And it's a fearful time, a depressing time for her and her family.

Steve Veazey 31:13

Yeah,

Linda Booth 31:14

Their situation is compounded by being isolated because of Coronavirus. She and her husband have a little rescue dog named Freddie and Sharon told me of the comfort that this little creature brings her when she's sitting in her chair. He comes over and he just stares at her. And she'll say to Freddie, come on. And he jumps in her lap and lays down across her chest. And she Pat's him. And Sharon said, I told Sharon, I said, "I believe that little dog is God's way of reminding you that God is with you during this very difficult time. You're not alone. God is near laying across your lap. Do you feel God's warmth and reassurance?" and she replied, "Yes, I do". Steve, I remember a story You once told me it's been quite a while ago, about a feather floating through the air that reassured you that God was in the midst of a difficult struggle that the church was going through. Please tell me that story again.

Steve Veazey 32:22

Yeah, well, I appreciate you inviting me to do that. I hadn't thought about it for a while. The experience is that early one morning, I was out walking and when I walk I tend to, to think and and pray. And on this particular day, it was during a time when the church was engaged in some particular struggles. But also It was a time when I was thinking a lot about the church's mission of sharing the peace of Jesus Christ in a world of conflict, and what is it that continues to hold us back doing that? And so I engaged in a practice of prayer that I call circles of prayer or circles of concern. I start with myself, praying for peace. And then the circles get larger and larger, family and congregation city. And I was praying for the Worldwide Church during a time of questioning and conflict and reaction over a particular issue, and then I started praying for the world. In all the conflict and struggle, and just then I heard just a flutter above me and a white feather came floating down. And I had the presence of mind just to stick out my hand and it had landed in my hand. And at the time, I thought, well, that that's interesting. You know, I think I'll hold on to that feather. That that's kind of an unusual experience. And then Several days later, I ran across a journal. And it had an article on the Native American perspective regarding feathers, and the sacred nature of feathers. And so I read it with interest and then came to understand that in the Native American culture and tradition when a feather falls in your path, either falling before you or you find one on the pathway before you it's an indicator of Divine Presence and concern, and also an indicator that you're heading in the right direction and keep going in the direction that you're going in. So I can't explain that. I'm open to it. And it did bring comfort and assurance to me and a sense of peace that in the midst of struggle, there's a lot more going on around you than you may see and, and as Elbert a Smith said, once we see been a smaller part of what God is doing in creation. God's actions and involvement are, are much larger than what we're even perceiving in the moment. And when you take that perspective of faith, it helps you a lot in navigating through times like this.

Linda Booth 36:24

It does, my grandmother had a huge influence on my life and her life was not easy. She has had a lot of physical problems and poverty and a variety of things. And she was the kind of person who was always looking for God all around her and she never disappointed because in the smallest of everyday mundane occurrences, she was the God was right there. And that even though her struggle was intense, and might even continue, that she was not alone that God was in her midst. So, I love the story of the feather because it does remind and grandmother Tim would have loved that too. It does remind us that if we just pay attention, even in Coronavirus times that God is speaking to us through the voice of a child or the nature or however it is that God can break through into your life that God is near. I thank you for sharing that story, Steve. I have always remembered it and it's been a long time since you shared it with me. And as you well know, I love stories that tell about God showing up in everyday moments. For me, they're like modern day scriptures. They're holy, they're inspiring. They're transforming. Are there any other lessons, advice or stories that you'd like to share with someone going through a desert are dark night of the soul experience right now?

Steve Veazey 38:06

Well, I think the scriptures are a real resource for us. Because there are sections of Scripture that reflects the struggles and the faith of people who are going through times like that. So in

Scripture, especially some of the Psalms reflect those kinds of times as well as some of the other books of Scripture obviously. But in Psalm 30 verse five, there's a line that often I just rehearse to myself as a kind of shoring up. Have faith and hope during difficult times and it goes like this. This is Psalms Chapter 30, verse five, weeping may linger for the night. But joy comes with the morning. And I can remember times in the midst of struggles, I would just I would say that and there would be like an awakening of some aspect of hope and faith that led me to persevere and and to wait for what was coming. Another one that's very familiar to a lot of people is Psalm 139:7. And it goes, If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me and the light around me become night Even the dark This is not dark to you, speaking to God, the night is as bright as the day for darkness is as light to you. So as we're talking about the dark night of the soul, it seemed that that sentiment from thousands of years ago, written in Psalm 139 spoke especially the times like we're discussing. So, I guess the bottom line is that there is true spirit and true spirituality and true spiritual growth. Even during times we perceive or would describe as darkness. Just as there is in times we would perceive as joyful and lie and That's the expansive nature of God's presence in the midst of human life.

Linda Booth 41:07

Yes, absolutely. In fact, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book about darkness. She talks about you probably read the book, she talks about how you need the darkness in order for the brightness to for you to feel and sense that darkness or the light and walk in the nighttime if you look around, there's like, even all around you in the stars and the street lights. And so darkness is an important part of life because it is also light in the darkness.

Steve Veazey 41:45

Yes.

Linda Booth 41:46

That's what you're saying, there's light in darkness.

Steve Veazey 41:48

Yeah, we tend to think dualistically about our lives. It's either light or dark. It's either good or bad. But in actuality, a lot of our existence is in between those, those poles, and instead of saying ones good ones bad, both are and so we search for our faith and spirituality in the midst of the realities of life.

Linda Booth 42:23

Yes, yes. Well, thank you, dear friend for sharing your time and

Steve Veazey 42:29

I hope it was helpful.

Linda Booth 42:31

I believe it was, I believe it was and your testimonies with our Coffee Buzz listeners. It's, you know, it's reassuring that a prophet president of Community of Christ has also wandered in



spiritual desert, encountered God and continues to allow God to transform him. Thank you for your willingness to be authentic, vulnerable and transparent with us and with God. Thank you Coffee Buzz listeners for joining our conversation. If you're experiencing a dark time, I pray that what you've heard helps you as you journey through the spiritual desert and brings about a spiritual awakening and rebirth. And remember that God is still with you. Even though you may feel alone. Please watch for next month's episode of Coffee Buzz. I'll be having a conversation with one of Steve's two counselors in the First Presidency, Scott Murphy. And if you haven't checked out Stephen, my last conversation on systemic racism, you can read it in the September October Herald.

Josh Mangelson 43:52

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