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Set and Setting: The Where and When of an ESE - Rev. Seth D Jones ©

Scripture:

Numbers 22, Luke 1

Through the month of November, we will be looking at the structure of Extraordinary Spiritual Experiences by way of Scripture. ESEs are worthy of study and attention, and neither study nor attention have been given them in any real way from a theological perspective. We skip over them to what we think they mean without luxuriating in the epic strangeness of these weird events. Which is sort of strange, isn't it? I mean, we say all kinds of weird things on a Sunday morning, the weirdest of which is what we will say soon - This is my body, take and eat; This is my blood, take and drink. We act like we know what this means without thinking about the Extraordinary Spiritual claim we are making about the Experience that led to doing such a weird thing in the first place.

Today I want to start at the beginning of the ESE event and over the next four weeks talk us through each part of an ESE. I have chosen two ESEs from scripture for this exploration - Balaam's Donkey and Mary's Annunciation. I chose them because they are two of my favorite stories. I want to show you, over the next four weeks, that there is a way to think through ESEs and to see that they are pointing us to an incredibly complex, wild, and strange world. It is in this world, this strange experience of life, that we find our faith and find our way to God.

Let me tell you again what an ESE is. Extraordinary Spiritual Experiences are experiences which put us into direct contact with the divine and also radically change the lives of those who experience them. ESEs carry their own meaning, and at the same time require the experiencer to make meaning of the ESE. The Bible is rich with ESEs, and Scripture provides maps for making meaning of ESEs. ESEs demand meaning, but the pathways to meaning are slippery, ethereal, as if we are looking 'through a glass darkly' (1 Cor 13:12). Meanings change over time, in different contexts and as we ourselves change.

Another element of an ESE is that it is usually epically unusual and weird. When we think of the ESEs in Scripture - angelic visitations, talking animals, prophetic dreams, resurrections, possessions, visionary events, foreseeing the future, interventions into the natural world - we also need to think of ESEs outside of Scripture as well. It is often when people experience an ESE in the world that they begin to wonder if the church has anything to say to them about those experiences. Encounters with dead relatives, near death experiences, deja-vu and synchronicities (where two apparently unrelated events come to you with the same meaning), experiences of lost time, vivid dreams are all structured in the same way as the ESEs we see in Scripture. And these are just the

spontaneous ESEs. There are also facilitated ESEs, meaning there are things we can do or substances we can take that will trigger an ESE as well.

How are we to make sense, make meaning of these experiences? Well, first, we don't make meaning of them right away. This is the mistake we make when we read Scripture. We jump over the ESE to the meaning, or we read the ESE and assume the meaning from the outset, either by our own thoughts but more likely what some preacher or commentator told us. What we really need to do is slow down, slow way down, and find out what is really going on, to dive into the experience itself.

When we slow things down, a structure begins to emerge, a way of understanding these weird events that helps us get even deeper into the meaning that is trying to come through. And that is what an ESE is trying to do - convey some sort of meaning or sense to us. But it is hard, because we already walk around with frameworks of meaning, with ways of making sense of the world. An ESE forces us out of those frameworks and into new ways of thinking and experiencing the world. ESEs break down barriers and boundaries. They deconstruct patterns and habits of thought and mind.

ESEs in the Bible help us understand, first, ESEs you may have already had, and second, to prepare you for your own ESE. Because at the center of every religion, I would argue, is a profound and powerful ESE, or perhaps several, that gives rise to the faith. The ESEs in Scripture are really a model for our own ESEs, a way to frame and help make sense of these deep spiritual experiences that happen over and over again in the lives of faith of those in the Bible and also in the world.

We now live in a time where our list of propositions about the faith we follow are meaningless to people who are not a part of the church, and those propositions are also losing meaning for people in the church. Instead, people want an experience of the faith, not a list of propositional belief statements. They want an experience of God. They may not want the wild, full-on, roller-coaster, brain-melting encounter with angels on the road, like our story from Numbers 22, or a revelation of world changing pregnancies, like in Mary's encounter with the Angel Gabriel, but they want some sort of divine and spiritual encounter with that which is not them. Most people know there is more to the world than we can see. The ESE is, for all practical purposes, the future of the church because the ESE is the beginning of the church.

On, then, to the structure of an ESE. An ESE is structured through 4 aspects or stages:

- ***The Set and Setting - the Where and When***
- ***The Appearance - the Who or What***
- ***The Revelation - the Why and How***
- ***The Disclosure - the Meaning***

This week, we are looking at the Set and Setting. Where and when an ESE takes place is an essential aspect to the entire event. ESEs often occur in liminal spaces, spaces which are beyond, between, or removed from the normal passage of people and time. The key element to liminality as both a location and an experience is that it is defined by change and transition. Liminal spaces are defined by the transitions and changes which occur within and as a result of being within them. "It is via the liminal that persons and groups are taken apart, recomposed, and regenerated"¹.

Taking the time to learn about the Set and Setting of an ESE can tell us much about the experience that is about to happen or the experience that has happened. Set and Setting encompasses the context of feelings, tradition, culture, and personal state of mind and body when the ESE occurs. The Set and Setting can, in some sense, be controlled or planned, but it is almost always concurrent with a liminal time and space.

The phrase "set and setting" comes from research into psychedelic medicines. Some of those medicines sound scary, like LSD, Magic Mushrooms, DMT, and ayahuasca, but don't let it scare you. Psychedelic means "mind-altering" and there is a renaissance in psychedelic research going on right now. The research is important for our look at ESEs because part of that research has to do with mystical experiences. You will hear more about this as we go through this month. For now, Dr. Ido Hartogsohn, researcher in the history of psychedelics, clarifies set and setting, stating:

Set is understood as anything related to the internal state of a person, including personality, preparation for the experience, intention, as well as "mood, expectations, fears, wishes" (Metzner and Leary, 1967: 5). Setting is understood as anything related to the environment in which the experience takes place, including the physical environment, the emotional/social environment, and finally the cultural environment--the ideas and beliefs which are prevalent in the society regarding drug effects and the world in general.²

Let's talk about Setting first.

When we speak of Setting, we are talking about place and time. Our stories are helpful in making this clear. When we think about the place that an ESE occurs, we need to

¹ Thomassen, Bjørn, *Liminality and the Modern: Living through the In-between*, Ashgate Publishing, 2014, 38.

² Hartogsohn, Ido. "Constructing Drug Effects: A History of Set and Setting." *Drug Science, Policy and Law*, (January 2017). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050324516683325>.

understand that places are changed by an ESE. There are places that become 'holy' because of the ESE that has occurred in that space. Think of the fountain of Lourdes, a pilgrimage place in France where Mother Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous in February of 1858. Bernadette was sitting by the Grotto of Massabielle, where water flows from underground into a small pool. Mary appeared to her and disclosed various revelations to her, among them that healing is available for those who are ill. Almost immediately, the Grotto of Massabielle became the Fountain of Lourdes, attracting the sick and lame from all over Europe. The Catholic church confirmed several of the healings and declared that the water of Lourdes is holy water, the same water that fell on Jesus at his baptism. This is an example of a place that has been transformed by an ESE.

Balaam is a prophet for hire in the kingdom of Balak, which is located in "Pethor, which is on the Euphrates in the land of Amaw" (Num 22:5). No one really knows where this is anymore, but it is likely in what is now Jordan. For our part of the story the important element is that Balaam's encounter takes place on a road from Pethor to Moab, which is where Balaam is going so that he can bless the troops of Moab in their war against Israel.

In-between places are key to ESEs. Balaam is on a road between two places. "In-between" is what we mean by liminality. The best definition of liminality is "an in-between place where change and transformation takes place". This is what will happen to Balaam. He will be changed in this place. Where Balaam is headed is important as well. He is going to Moab. Moab is on the east side of the Dead Sea and was considered to be a fertile, mountainous region.

Moab is named after the son of Lot and one of his daughters, from after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:36-37). Moses is buried in Moab, though no one knows where, as Deuteronomy 34 tells us. Ruth, one of Jesus' ancestors, is from Moab as well. The Moabites were often at war with Israel and worshiped other gods. When we as Americans think of Moab, you might think of Moab, Utah, which is a high desert region in the eastern part of the state. The Mormons, who settled Utah, think of Biblical Moab as the verdant and beautiful valley you walk through just before you enter paradise, Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey.

This is the setting of Balaam's story with his donkey. He is on the road to the place of the ancestors of the faith, and in that in-between space on the way to the valley just before paradise angels show up and animals speak.

The other aspect of setting is time. The annunciation to Mary and the conception of Jesus is an ESE of the highest order. We have angels, spontaneous pregnancy, prophecy all coming together in the person of Mary. But the first thing Luke tells us about this event is not where, but when. He says "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God..." (Lk 1:26). Time is as important as place in Scripture and in ESEs. When people remember where they were when Kennedy was shot or 9/11 happened, they remember the date and time as well. A person will often remember exactly when an ESE occurred, just like many people remember when they were baptized. Time matters. It matters as much as place.

So what is the "sixth month"? It is one of the great mysteries of this story. The first possibility is that the sixth month is correlated with the Jewish calendar, which would be the month of Adar. The Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar, so Adar is between February and March in our calendar. Adar is marked by the festival of Purim, which is the holiday that celebrates Queen Esther and the Israelites victory over the near genocide that was almost committed by Haman.

But the problem with correlating Mary's ESE with Adar is that time was measured in Nazareth at that time by the Greek calendar, since Nazareth was under the Roman Empire at the time and was heavily influenced by Greek culture, and Luke, the supposed author of this Gospel is clearly not Jewish. Luke is very Greek. The sixth month in the Greek calendar was the month of Poseidon, or January. This is interesting. Poseidon is the god of the oceans, the water god. In John 2, Jesus turns water into wine, a miracle in and of itself, but in the context of religions of influence around Jesus, Jesus is laying claim to both the world of Poseidon (water) and Dionysius (wine) in that miracle. In John 7, Jesus calls himself 'living water' to the woman at the well. And finally, when Jesus dies on the Cross in the Gospel of John, both water and blood spill from his side when he is stabbed by the centurion's spear (John 19). We come to this just from talking about the nature of time with Mary's ESE.

The most likely meaning of the sixth month, though, may be that this event is in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist. Luke 1:24 says, "After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion." Then, in verse 26 Luke writes, "In the sixth month...". This is interesting, too, because Luke is prescient if this is the case. Neither the Jewish calendar nor the Roman calendar are used to measure time in Luke's version of events. Think about how we measure time now. We measure time according to the same scale Luke presents to us--according to the birth of Jesus.

The other important aspect to this first stage of an ESE is the 'set'. Set refers to the state of mind of the experiencer, the influences of family and friends, culture, and status, and the expectations that are brought into the ESE. So let's call it 'mindset', rather than 'set'. If the ESE is facilitated, planned in some way, the mindset of the experiencer can have some influence on how the ESE will present itself.

The Bible is notoriously poor about presenting us with how people feel and what their mindset is in the stories we read. This is because the sense of interior experience was not understood in the same way as we understand it in the modern world. Feelings were thought of as coming from outside a person. Thoughts were considered to be communal rather than individual; people participated in a flow of the fluid of ideas and thoughts and some people were more open to that flow than others.

As a result, we project wildly into how people were feeling in Scripture. We pretend we know what they were thinking and feeling when things happen to them because that is how we would feel if that were happening to us. It is important for us to realize, though, especially when thinking through an ESE, whether our own or another person's, that we cannot know what another person is thinking or feeling. At the same time, there is one thing we can say about an ESE which was true in ancient times as now, and that is what we often say when we hear about an ESE. We say, "Wow. That was weird. That was strange. That doesn't fit with anything I know." This was true for Mary and for Joseph. Joseph has to have his own ESE before he accepts what has happened to Mary.

We do get a bit of a clue, though, to what Mary's mindset was when the angel showed up. It is the same throughout the Bible when angels show up. First, Luke tells us she was 'troubled' or 'perplexed'. Second, the angel knows what this really means. It means Mary was afraid, because the angel says, "Do not be afraid" (Lk 1:29-30).

With Balaam, his mindset can only be conjectured. Balaam is on a journey to a gathering for war and all the tension and expectation that entails. He is a paid prophet, meaning he is paid by others to bless and sanction battles, a little like a priest praying over Crusaders before they journey to Jerusalem to rescue the city from Saracens. Soon, though, we will find out Balaam is angry. He is angry at his donkey. That is all we have for Balaam's mindset.

ESEs are powerful events that transform how we see the world. ESEs are what happen when the divine and the human link up somehow in this world. We become transformed by the spiritual, by the infinite, by the strange and unexpected. Think about an ESE you may have had. When I say ESE, I mean an event that radically changed you, like Mother Mary with the angel Gabriel or Balaam with his donkey encountering an angel on the road. Mary is not the same after her visit from the angel. The Magnificat shows us that very clearly. Her entire worldview has been upended. She now holds this event, this ESE, close to her heart and ponders it *for the rest of her life*.

Think about an ESE, one you have had or one you have read or heard about. Where did it happen? What do you know about that place? Once you find out more about that place, how does it change what you know about the ESE? When did it take place? What does the time in the seasons, in history, in your life mean to you? How does time change because of this ESE? Often there is a B-ESE and an A-ESE, a before and after because things are so radically different. Mystics often define their entire lives based on a single ESE.

Next week, we will take a look at The Appearance. What is showing up in an ESE? I hope, after this month, you read and hear Scripture completely differently with this way of thinking. Scripture is a tour and journey from one ESE to another, each of them radically altering how we understand the world and our relationship with God and Christ.

Amen.