

God Works His Grace through People

by Julie Martinez

Our Savior Lutheran Church, Pagosa Springs, CO

It can sometime seem like God has quite a sense of humor! And not a very funny one, either. When it happened to me, it was because He wanted to get my attention, and I couldn't help but hear His voice. But, to tell my story, we need to go back to the beginning.

I grew up in a town that was small enough that most of the kids in school belonged to one Christian denomination. Although my father owned a successful business in town and was well respected, that respect did not automatically carry over to my brother and me in school. We were subjected to the taunts and occasional fights after school, and we were excluded from much of the social life of the other kids, which revolved around their church. We each compensated by immersing ourselves in books and in our schoolwork, which only added to the sense of isolation.

My family was unaffiliated and we had little exposure to our own religion, other than occasional visits to my uncle in the Chicago area, and attendance at Sunday Hebrew School at his synagogue. The Reform movement is the most liberal of American Judaism, and the Torah is not taken too seriously, at least as far as the dietary laws and other practices that drive the life of a more Orthodox Jew. As a consequence, I grew up to be intensely private, and almost totally secular, although I was always aware of my heritage as part of the "people", if not the faith, of Israel. I left that town, and everything it represented, as soon as I was old enough.

I earned a degree in quantitative analysis from Arizona State University, and soon after graduating, I established myself in a smaller Arizona community, where I found people from many different backgrounds and religious beliefs. It was comfortable there. After spending several years working as a computer systems designer for a test laboratory, I began to find that line of work unsatisfying and fairly meaningless, and I gravitated into a second career as a paramedic and then as a helicopter flight nurse. Living in Arizona, I found that almost anything I wanted to do was nearby, and I spent most of my time rock climbing, backpacking, and skiing. Life was pretty good for the most part, but some part of me knew that there had to be more to it than what I had.

Wanting a change, I moved to southern Colorado 7 years ago, and soon met someone, fell in love, and married him. Three years later, my husband died, by his own hand, after a long struggle with some deep-seated problems he could not resolve. I was working on the local ski patrol at the time, and the owners told me to take off as much time as I needed. At about the same time, a friend discovered that she could not attend an archaeological seminar in Israel for which she had paid, and offered to "sell" her spot to me. I desperately needed to get away for a while, so I went in her place.

The seminar lasted 10 days, and we visited sites all over Israel. Those Bible stories I vaguely remembered from Hebrew School took on new life as I pictured the patriarchs and kings of Israel, and walked where they had walked. It was great! I cancelled my flight home and stayed for another 2 weeks and wandered around the country on my own. An Israeli man who had taught part of the seminar invited me to his home in Kefar Savah, and he and his family taught me a lot about my own faith. I was ashamed that I knew so little.

Israel is a small country, and during my wanderings, I visited the Kotel (previous to 1967 also known as the "Wailing Wall") in Jerusalem several times. The feeling of strength and power there was almost overwhelming. Jews believe this sole surviving remnant of King Solomon's temple is the prayer gateway to God, and that prayers from everywhere in the world go there before ascending to the heavens. In any event, standing there touching the cold limestone blocks with my face and hands, and trying to

really pray for the first time in my life, I sensed an acute emptiness inside me. Something really important was missing from my life, namely God. There was an agonizing sense that God was very close, but through my own ignorance and indifference, He was also just barely out of my reach, which made Him feel very, very far away. I remember my prayer that day. Not knowing any of the “traditional” prayers, I just spoke from my heart, and among other things, I asked him to give me a teacher who would be able to show me what I needed to know.

Back home, a new spiritual hunger consumed me, and I began an almost obsessive learning process. I essentially taught myself Hebrew, which was time-consuming and frustrating at first. Once I learned the new alphabet, the words and phrases began to take shape, and my soul resonated with the ancient messages. I bought books about Jewish history and religion, followed the weekly parsha schedule and subscribed to several rabbinical commentaries. I read the Hebrew Bible again and again, and once more experienced the connection to those ancient ancestors, kings, and prophets, whom I had “met” on my journey. I found a small Conservative Hebrew congregation 60 miles away in Durango, and became somewhat involved in the Friday night Shabbat services. The American Conservative movement is closer to traditional “Orthodoxy”, and there is a stronger emphasis on “observance” of Torah, and the keeping of the many dietary and ceremonial laws. I liked that, and I learned how to keep kosher, to follow the prayer liturgies, and to understand and observe the holidays. I looked forward to the Shabbat services, although sometimes only three or four people attended, technically not even a minyan. I loved the way the ancient prayers and psalms were recited and chanted in Hebrew, and I found a deep connection to the ancient traditions we were following. More importantly, during this time I slowly gained awareness of the greatness and majesty of God, and that He really does hear our prayers.

After services, we would sing the Kiddush, blessing the wine and bread, and I loved that feeling of “community” and the social closeness I shared with these other Jews. But spiritually there was still something missing. I thought that I just hadn’t learned enough, and if I intensified my efforts to study and observe the law, that those things would bring me closer to God. The paradox slowly revealed itself that the more I learned about the law and its requirements, the harder it was becoming to observe it, and the further away from God I felt! First and foremost among all the commandments of Torah, God has commanded us to love Him with all our hearts, our souls, and our strength, (Deut. 6:4-10). These verses make up the “Sh’ma” and “V’ahavta” prayers, which begin “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One”. Although I recited these prayers every day, and really wanted to love Him that way, what I actually felt was closer to fear. God’s love for me seemed so conditional on what I did, and there was so much I continued to do wrong. Throughout the history of Israel, God has rewarded righteousness, but also punished his people who failed to honor Him by keeping His law. At times, the law made me feel righteous, but deep down I knew that I really couldn’t keep all these commandments all the time, or even come close, and I realized that my feelings of “righteousness” were actually pretty self-righteous.

Throughout this time, I continued to read and study, sometimes going off on weird tangents. I studied the writings of Kabbalists like Rabbi David Cooper, Buddhist teachings by the Dalai Lama, and even listened to some Mormon friends once as they tried to describe themselves, not as Christians, but as the “New Israel”. However, none of that really made any sense, and I found myself continually drawn to the writings of the Bible. Meanwhile, it seemed that my prayer for a teacher was going unanswered.

One day last summer, I read an article in the local newspaper written by the Lutheran minister. In it, he stated, in effect, that Christianity is the only religion that offers us God’s love for which nothing is required, except faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf. All other religions, of which he listed several, require their believers to “try and try” to earn God’s favor. His point seemed to be that none of us can ever succeed in doing so, because of our inherent sin. I found this highly insulting. Not only was he co-opting our God, he was claiming to know Him better than any of the Rabbis or the truly observant Jews I had met. How dare he say that his was the only way to God! After stewing about it for a while, I

wrote a short essay about Judaism and what it meant to me and sent it to another Jewish friend who had also read the article. He suggested that I take it to the editor of the newspaper.

I didn't want to do that, so I decided to write a letter to this minister instead and send the essay to him. My letter was not exactly tactful as I asked him to have more respect for people of other faiths in the community. I tossed it in the mailbox, not really expecting anything to come of it, but two days later I found a long, polite letter in my own mailbox thanking me for reading to his article, addressing all my comments and explaining a little more about Christianity. At the same time he made it very clear that he would not back down from his basic premise, that being that Jesus was the only way to God and that any theology that did not recognize that was not valid. He ended his letter by inviting me to meet with him.

I had some real reservations about doing that, knowing that I would be seriously outgunned theologically. On the other hand, I was very impressed that he did not respond in anger (which I might have done in his place) and he wrote some things that were really intriguing. I was particularly interested in his comments about how Lutherans look at the law, especially when he quoted one of the ten commandments, "You shall have no other gods before Me". I knew very little about Christianity, but from a few isolated, early experiences, my impression was that Christianity borders on paganism and idolatry, because Christians obviously worship more than one God, and sometimes even seem to worship statues and idols, all the things that the Torah warns against. So I found it very odd that this would be the commandment he mentioned. I wanted to know how a Christian could believe that he was observing this commandment when he also claimed that Jesus was God and worshipped him as well. I wrote him a letter back asking him to explain this, and telling him that I would like to meet with him and talk about it.

We met later that week, and Rev. Bolland spent over two hours with me, outlining his beliefs, but more important to me at the time, he also listened to me when I talked about my own journey into Judaism and what it meant to me. We read a lot from the Old Testament, and I was a little surprised at how well he seemed to know it. We talked about creation, Moses, Isaiah, and God's promises and covenants with Israel, as well as how Christianity fits into the picture. I asked a lot of hard questions, and he answered each one honestly, even to the point of admitting that nobody really understands all the fine points of the theology, because some of it, being of God, was beyond our human understanding. He spoke of the Trinitarian nature of God, and argued that this did not violate the Oneness of God as stated in the Sh'ma, a point of view that was incomprehensible to me. How could this not be polytheism?

One point he made that day was that God has spoken to us through the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, and that the word of God is the place to start in any search for truth. I agreed wholeheartedly that the Old Testament was the word of God, but I wasn't ready to give the New Testament the same status. In fact, I really wanted to ask him something along the lines of, "Come on, you don't REALLY believe this, do you?" But I never asked the question because I didn't have to. It was so obvious that he did believe, and that he absolutely loves God, and I was immediately envious that he could love God so completely, in a way that I hadn't been able to. I couldn't let him see that, however, and I told him that while I had enjoyed talking with him, and I would like to talk with him again, I didn't want to become a "project". He just smiled and told me not to worry, that I could stop by and talk anytime and he would not try to "put a notch" on his Bible. His last words to me that day were, "We're not as far apart as you think." I thought, "Who are you kidding?" His beliefs, especially this whole idea of the Trinitarian nature of God, seemed so alien to me, as different from mine as night is from day.

Over the next days, I found myself thinking about the things he had said often. He had given me a lot of reading material, some about the Trinity, some about Old Testament passages that supposedly foretold Jesus as the Messiah. I read about the Trinity, but couldn't grasp that concept at all. Even so, I thought that I could at least understand how he could believe that he was worshipping One God in that context in spite of the apparent contradiction. The Old Testament prophecies seemed pretty sketchy to

me, and I wrote him again with a detailed refutation of some of them, using the original Hebrew texts and picking them apart word by word, and then looking at them in their historic context. I was satisfied that these prophecies were not speaking about Jesus. After all, why would God give Israel the Torah, warn us over and over not to “worship the gods of the people around us”, and then somewhere along the way change the rules on us and not even tell us? Even acknowledging the clear historical fact that Israel had drifted away from God and the covenant over and over again, there was never a moment in the Bible that told us that the “everlasting covenant” had been abrogated, and that now a “new covenant” would be brought back to us through the gentiles. If this were true, it would have seemed like more than just a quirky sense of humor, but a really dirty trick!

In spite of my inability to accept these ideas, we met almost every week, at my request every time, for several months. Every time we met I would tell myself, “This is the last time. I just have one more set of questions and then I will be able to walk away and forget about this.” But each time, he listened to me, and let me steer the conversations into the paths where my questions were. His responses just seemed to lead me to more questions, and another meeting.

At some point, our discussions had changed in focus from Old Testament to New, and I read the whole thing twice in two days. I really liked some of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew about the law, but I had difficulty accepting the writings of the apostles and some of the other works. I once asked what he thought Jesus’ most important teaching was, expecting him to say, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength”. After all, that was exactly Jesus’ answer in Mark 12:29-30 when He was asked about the “most important commandment” in the law. I was just waiting to say, “Aha! That’s the V’ahavta! That’s ours! Jesus got that from us!” But he surprised me. Without a pause to even consider his reply, he simply said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.” I remember sitting there for several moments in stunned silence, not knowing how to respond. Was this true? Was this why I had left the recent Yom Kippur services still wondering if I had really been forgiven? Was this why I often doubted that God heard my prayers?

On another occasion I asked him how Jesus could be the Messiah when He never stated that fact. He pointed me to John 8, where Jesus was speaking with some Pharisees and eventually stated “Before Abraham was, I am”, a curiously worded phrase in English. He explained that the Greek verb parallels the Hebrew usage in the same way that God responded when Moses asked His name in Exodus 3:14 and was told, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* or , “I AM that I AM”). One of the first things I had learned in the Hebrew language was that the sacred, “unpronounceable name” of God, יְהוָה (unpronounceable because it spelled without any *nikkud*, or vowels) is a derivative form of the Hebrew root verb “to be”. As such, it is much more than just a name” of God, but it actually makes it very clear that God “is” (הוּוֹה, *hoveh*), “was” (הָיָה, *hayah*), and “will be” (יִיְהִי, *yi-y’heh*), all at the same time. Even without knowing any Hebrew, it is easy to see the similarity between these words. To hear that Jesus had used this same verb form in the local language of the time to describe himself rocked my soul. The meaning of Jesus’ comment would then have been very clear to the people of that time, who would have understood the full implications of this verb form. To them, He was claiming to be God! It certainly explained the violent response of the Pharisees in this setting (they immediately picked up rocks to kill Him for the specific crime of blasphemy).

That same day Rev. Bolland invited me to come to their Reformation Day service that coming Sunday. I really didn’t want to go. This was all really getting to me, and I never stopped thinking about it. More than once, I found myself wishing that I had never written him that first letter. Although I still didn’t believe it, I knew that he really did, and that his belief was not based on some pagan superstition, but on serious study of the Bible and the faith he had in the words he found there. I

needed to know more. Almost against my wishes, I showed up that Sunday morning, which seemed to surprise him as much as it did me.

Although I was uncomfortable with many things that day, (the cross, the crucifix, the prayers in the name of Jesus), I was also awed by the reverence of the service, and the side of him I had not seen before. (He later told me it was the “authority of the office”). Although the liturgy was obviously very different than in Hebrew worship, there were also many striking parallels in the form of worship, and I was very impressed with the seamless weaving of Old and New Testament throughout the service. I saw quite clearly that these traditions were ancient and very sacred as well. His bow toward the altar at the start of the service made me think of Aaron and the Holy of Holies, the sense of a sacred space being created at that moment, and it was a very powerful experience for me. There was a kind of subconscious recognition that this “authority of office” was not only real, but being honored by God right in front of my eyes. Once again that familiar sense that something was very close to me, but not quite close enough to touch or recognize haunted me. I left with the same soul-agony that I thought I had left behind in Jerusalem three years before, and I was not happy about it. That next week, I stopped in to his office to see him almost every day, but I just couldn’t seem to articulate my need. Some part of me was almost hoping that he would lose patience with me and tell me to leave him alone!

However, by that point I think it was already too late to walk away, so it’s a good thing he remained so patient. When I considered everything I believed about God, I realized that, as the Creator of all things, His power is beyond my comprehension. It began to seem like the ultimate in arrogance for me to declare what He could or could not do, or be. Who was I to scoff at the concept of the Trinity just because I could not understand it? I recalled the last Shabbat service I attended, where we invited the presence of the “Shekhina”, the spirit of God, into our service. If we Jews recognized this “Shekhina” as being a distinct spiritual presence, how could I then reject the concept of the Holy Spirit? My soul was truly in torment.

Since I hadn’t been able to find the words to tell him what I needed when I was sitting in his office, I sent him an email! I told him I needed to know if Jesus really was the Messiah, not just for gentiles, but for Jews also. I asked him to help me find what I was missing, namely the love and forgiveness that he had said God offers through Jesus. His response was all I could have hoped for. He told me that he would be honored to help me, and told me that Jesus is the Messiah for all people, including the Jews, and that His story is not only the beginning, but also the completion of the hope of my own faith. I would like to say that there was a moment of instant awareness that this was right, but it still took a long time to grow into it. There was some not inconsiderable pain involved in even allowing this opening of my heart to occur, and there were many tears of frustration, and feelings of guilt while I considered that I was abandoning my own people and my own faith. Rabbinical teachings say that assimilation (i.e. loss of national identity) is the greatest threat to Judaism today. I had heard this from my uncle many times. The warnings in the Old Testament about “being wiped off the face of the earth” referred not to physical death, but to this loss of Jewish identity. On the other hand, I realized that it was pretty stupid to cling to a misguided ideal of “nationhood”, and using it as an excuse to close my heart to what could very possibly be the truth for which I had been searching.

Then one day I realized that something essential had changed within me, and that in some small part of me, I really did believe that Jesus had to be the Messiah. The New Testament texts he had shown me, and their integration with the Old Testament prophecies I had once discarded made it too clear that they all pointed to Jesus. That day, I prayed to God, using Jesus’ name with some trepidation, for the first time ever.

When I saw Pastor Bolland again, I told him what had happened, and asked him what I needed to do next. He told me that I could continue to study and talk with him as long as I wanted, but that the next

step in truly embracing this seed of faith would be baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. My first instinct was to run as far away as I could get! For several nights I paced the floor, thinking about baptism. When I realized how torn I was, I picked up the New Testament and a concordance and started looking up references to forgiveness, and, ironically, they all seemed to say something about “repentance and baptism”, as if these two things went hand in hand. In fact, in Acts 9:18 I read that Saul, after his experience on the road to Damascus, was baptized before he even was given food or water! This must be really important. I had experienced sincere repentance at Yom Kippur, but the actual sense of forgiveness had always eluded me, and I realized that I wanted to be baptized right away. A few days later, I met with him again, and asked him if he would baptize me, right then, on a Friday morning. He just smiled, and then described the sacrament of baptism and all that it signified. He told me that baptism was not only the gift of God’s grace through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, but also the way to enter into the body of believers, and that the congregation would want to participate as well. I remember his exact words. “You don’t even know yet what blessings God is waiting to give you!”

A few weeks later, I knew that with all my heart I wanted the promise of forgiveness through Jesus Christ that God wanted to give me. As the congregation stood with me, Pastor Bolland baptized me in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Wow!

I went skiing the day after my baptism and one of my friends on patrol asked me if I felt different. All I could say was that I knew that there had been a change, and that I would probably see the effect of that change over time, hopefully throughout the rest of my life. Now, four weeks later, I’m no longer envious of the love for God that Pastor Bolland showed me during our first meeting, because I know it for myself. When God commanded me to love Him, I was unable to really do it, because of my own sins and my fear of Him. Today I know that God loves me so much, and so unconditionally, that He took on a human nature, kept the law perfectly in the way I could not, and then took the consequences of all my sins and fears and suffered that horrible death by crucifixion for me. That awareness has opened up my own heart, and replaced my fear with an incredible love and adoration for Him that I never knew was possible. When I kneel at the altar rail on Sunday mornings, the proximity to that “sacred space” fills me with awe, and with the cross above me I can feel the agony of what Jesus willingly suffered for me. When the pastor touches me and gives me the baptismal blessing, tears fill my eyes, and I get up and return to my seat, having been changed once more by the power of this “new covenant” that God has made with us.

When I look back on my journey from Jerusalem back to Colorado, and even before that, I can see that what happened for me was all God’s doing. My hunger to learn about my own spiritual roots taught me the Law, which led to an ever-increasing sense of desperation and hopelessness as I realized that I could never get the longed-for closeness to God through it’s observance. Like all of us, I was just not capable of doing that. My simple prayer for a teacher led me to a pastor, a man I never would have expected. And it was Pastor Bolland’s loving and patient teaching of the Gospel that brought the completion of my faith through Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God. I am awed and humbled that God loves me that much, and I thank Him every day for opening my heart so that I could hear His word, and for leading me, through a simple newspaper article, to someone who could discern my need, reach out in friendship, and share his faith with me. My spiritual hunger still exists, but it is no longer based on desperation, but on my love for God and my desire to continue to learn about Him, and I am only now beginning to truly enjoy the journey.