

Mystery Experienced

From the series: Aspects of God

Text: Numbers 33:23; Hebrews 1:2-3; John 14:16-17

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Our religions are the consequence of creative human imagining in response to God's revealing. God's revealing, if it is revealing, indeed, meets in us now and then with awareness, awareness of the wholly Other, and of the Holy Other, of God, of the sacred, of the holy. The human experience has been that now and again, to this one or that one, there is some breakthrough, some awareness, some experience of that which is beyond human capability to grasp. Yet the experience, the awareness will always result in a stumbling, stammering attempt to give expression to that which was experience. And so, we have our human religions with our statements, expressions, articulations of the truth as best we can bring it to expression in light of our experience.

Last week, celebrating Pentecost one week late, we said that the experience of the risen Christ, the living Lord, the foundational event of Christian faith was not the experience of the word in flesh, but rather, the experience of Spirit, the Spirit of Christ or the Spirit of God, the wind, the movement, the enlivening, creative movement that gives us an awareness of that intimate relationship with God, even though we can never adequately bring to expression that experience, but rather do so in human language, always limited, stammering and stuttering because we have been overwhelmed if we have met the living God.

The Sunday after Pentecost, which really was last week but celebrated here this week, therefore tries to gather the experience of the Christian year, the cycle, on this particular Sunday. Four Sundays before Christmas we begin with the Advent season, the One who came is coming, the birth of Christ at Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and the gift of the Spirit, and then on that next Sunday we say we believe in one God - God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, one God blessed forever, in traditional liturgical language. We speak of God as Triune because we want to affirm that God is one. But, the experience of God is trifold, and on this Sunday we simply point to that Christian understanding of God as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, one God.

The early Church, the immediate followers of Jesus, did not sit down to construct a mysterious doctrine by which to bewitch and confuse us. And the early Church did not sit down to construct some mysterious idea of God that would confuse generations ever after. They did what all people do who have religious experience - they simply began to express what they had experienced. And the immediate followers of Jesus, in the wake of his crucifixion and resurrection, were Jewish people and they had no idea at all that they were talking about some other God than the God of Israel. They were now not switching their loyalties; they were not now conceiving of some other deity; they were not now leaving that covenant, faithful God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob whose law came to expression with Moses, who had been spoken of by the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and all the rest.

These were faithful Jewish people who were still dealing with the same God, but a God now Who had been experienced, strangely enough, in the life of that Jesus whom they had known. And then this Jesus was crucified but, in the wake of that, nonetheless, they experienced his presence, as I said a moment ago, not in the flesh. "The word was made flesh and dwelt among us." But, that was one thing. This other Easter experience was something else. It was God in the Spirit, Jesus in the Spirit. How do you give expression to that kind of mysterious, baffling experience? And yet, how can you be silent if you have had that kind of intimate experience of God?

The writers of the Hebrews said in many and various ways to our forbears, "God made God's self known. But in these last days, God has spoken to us by a son who, he said, is the express image of God." The word used there is *icon*, and if you have had any experience in the lush sanctuaries of Eastern Orthodox churches, you have seen icons, those paintings of the head of Christ or some symbolism of the Trinity or some saint. Eastern Orthodox piety and devotion has been conditioned to have its consciousness raised and its spirit elevated through the contemplation of the icon. Those of us that don't know anything about it mock it and say, "Well, that's idolatry. Even the Heidelberg Catechism said God will not be worshiped through pictures or dumb idols." Yet, there are those who, in contemplation of that icon, find themselves lifted into the presence of God; it's a way of devotion or pious expression. The writer to the Hebrews says that Jesus was the *icon* of God, the express image of God. He couldn't have said anything any more elevated of Jesus than to say that this Jesus in the flesh, the word made flesh dwelling among us, this one was the very picture, the image, the expression of God in human flesh.

I return again and again to old John 14, but it's so revealing of that early Christian community, trying to give expression to its experience. Now, don't think of the disciples sitting around together at a campfire with Jesus in the midst. This Gospel writer was writing some sixty years later and probably reflecting the oral tradition of the stories and the conversations and all of that, and he said, "How can I say that this Jesus, as a matter of fact, was the unveiling

of God?" And so, he pictures them in these middle chapters in John's Gospel as a conversation with Jesus where Jesus is getting them ready for his departure -

"Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me," etc., etc.

"In my Father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you," -

all of that nice language, and then Phillip who in the fourth Gospel plays the role of dunce, raises the questions that we all have but feel too self-conscious to raise. He says, "Oh, Jesus, I've really been wanting to say this all along. Just show us the Father and we will be satisfied."

It's what we all sigh at one time or another, don't we? "God, if you'd just show yourself. If somehow or other I could just get a handle on it, just a glimpse, perhaps. Just a tickle in my pinkie."

Jesus says, "I've been with you so long and you still don't know. If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." This, now, is not what Jesus said. This is what *they* said he would have said if he had said what they know to be true. Do you get the difference? This was *their experience*, in his face there was God.

We tell the story and we're going to keep telling the story because somehow or other the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was there in that flesh, his face, the human face of God. And so, they who had known Jesus in the flesh knew him to be crucified, experienced him yet to be alive in the Spirit, talked about God and they talked about Jesus as the face of God, and they talked about the Spirit as the Spirit of God, and they had the "stuff" out of which subsequent generations in subsequent centuries put together using Greek philosophical concepts to say that God Who is Mystery has been known in concrete human flesh and continues to be experienced spiritually through a focus on Jesus who seems to bring up the depths of the mystery.

Today I want to say that Mystery, the aspect of God is Mystery, but Mystery experienced, and Israel always knew that they didn't know God in the depths of God's mystery. And the Christian tradition which took the God of Israel and put the face of Jesus on the God of Israel and experienced the Spirit of God through the mediation of Jesus, the early Church tacked that nuanced adjustment and understanding of God onto the images and metaphors of Israel, and the images and metaphors of God for Israel were Ruler, King, more intimately Father. But, essentially Israel thought in terms of God as the Ruler "out there," "up there," engaged in their history and yet beyond their history, and they thought of God as getting directly involved in human events, although as an imperial ruler removed.

That conception of God we speak of classically as "Theism." Judaism is theistic. Islam is theistic. Christianity has traditionally been theistic. A theistic

understanding of God, even though we say it is a triune God, having been present in the flesh of Jesus and continuing to be present in the Spirit; nonetheless, God is "out of here," "up there," beyond us, traditionally. And our Christian understanding of God got attached to that kind of imagery, and the difficulty with that imagery is that it doesn't connect easily with what we know about the cosmic reality of which our lives are a part.

The Episcopal Bishop, John Shelby Spong, Bishop of Newark, has just written a book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. Bishop Spong is courageous, if nothing else, and he dares to challenge that theistic image of God, saying that image of God is no longer adequate to express how we experience our world. He says theism has to go. Well, it will go kicking and screaming; it will go with great, great difficulty. I've been trying and trying for some time to divest my head of theistic understanding and I can't do it yet, but I'm working at it. I got a letter Friday from Bishop Spong who said that in 1999 he has one full weekend available and he'll give it to us. November 12, 13 and 14 of 1999, Bishop Spong will come here to help us to disengage from classical, traditional theistic conceptions of God. So, mark it down now. He will follow in the fall of '99, when in the spring of '99, we'll have Marcus Borg here so that we can meet Jesus again for the first time. And maybe as we continue to work at this we might be involved in that advanced guerilla warfare that's trying to find out how to say God in light of everything else we experience, because you can just import the old images and metaphors as long as you don't want that God to be intimately involved in your day-to-day experience.

As I said a moment ago, Israel knew that it didn't know God. I think this is the point of that old story, Moses in Exodus 33 saying to God, "I know you're angry with this people, but you know, if you're not going, I'm not going." God says, "Relax, I'm going." Moses said, "Otherwise, how will the other peoples of the world know that we're distinct?"

You see, Moses was into exclusivism a long time ago. He wanted to be distinct. Don't we all? We all like to be special. He said, "Well, one more thing, then - I'll go if you go. You say that you'll go, but show me your glory."

God said, "Aha, Moses. I gave you my name, the Lord, Yahweh. I Am what I Am. I will be where I will be. I will be there for you. I told you my name, but my glory you cannot see. Moses, if I came bare before you, it would blow you away, it would destroy you. You humankind, you cannot countenance, you couldn't stand, you couldn't take in a raw exposure to my glory. Moses, come here and stand on a rock next to me. What I'm going to do, Moses, is I'm going to pass all of my goodness before you and I'm going to put you in a cleft of the rock, I'm going to put my hand over you and all of my glory will pass by, and when it's passed, I'll take my hand away and you can see my backside. Don't even think about trying to see my face. Don't even think about trying to take in the mystery. But, I'll hide

you in a cleft of the rock and pass by, and you'll get a glimpse after I've passed by."

Some of you who are older remember an old hymn, "He Hideth My Soul in the Cleft of the Rock" - "He hideth my soul in a dry, thirsty land and hideth my soul in the depths of his love and covers me there with his hand." The experience of God is that, in the experience of the terrors of life, we know that there's a cleft in the rock and God's hand protectively covering because more than that we couldn't handle. And we can relax in the cleft of the rock with the hand of God over us, knowing that, as we stammer to try to say something about that experience, God will be just fine. God is not put in jeopardy when we start messing with the images and metaphors. If we should someday in the year 2005, after laboriously for seven or eight years working at this problem, if we don't blow ourselves apart, and if we could do it rationally, if we could do it with a sense of security, with one another in dialogue, if we could keep talking about how can we say God in the 21st century, then maybe in another half dozen years or so we may stumble on a way of saying that will be much more in line with the world into which you graduates are all going.

But, this is my prayer for you - No matter how the images, no matter how the metaphors are going to change, that you'd still be able to sing something comparable to "God hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock, in the depths of God's love, places God's hand on me there." Because it's *Mystery*. Those that know an awful lot about the definition of God don't know it all. And those who don't know are on the threshold of wisdom, opening to the possibility of fresh experience.

There were two fleas buried deeply in a forest of hair on a beast. One said to the other, "Do you think there really is anything called Dog?"