

The Presence of God: Intelligence and Attention

Pentecost XIII

I Kings 19:1-14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Gary Eberle, in *The Geography of Nowhere*, commenting on the passing of the age of faith, uses a marvelous poem by Philip Larkin, an English poet. Eberle comments,

In "Church Going," Larkin imagines that someday Christian churches will fall into disuse and ruin as had Stonehenge and the Acropolis. Perhaps scholars will come with their notepads, or the superstitious will come at night to perform half-remembered magic. He sees the old church becoming:

A shape less recognisable each week,
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was...

And yet, he notes one thing about this place will not pass away - the inner spiritual need and hunger of the beings who built it in the first place.

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blest air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete.
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious.
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in.
If only that so many dead lie round.

Sometimes it happens as it happened to Elijah. It's no accident that chapter 19 follows chapter 18 and the story of Israel's history recorded in I Kings. Chapter 18 is that story of the duel between Elijah, the prophet of Yahweh, and the prophets

of Baal, introduced by Queen Jezebel, the foreign royalty who had brought another worship and cult into the very heart of Israel. Do you remember that story of the prophets of Baal in a contest with Elijah? They pray for their gods to consume the sacrifice and the heavens are brass and there is no response. Then, Elijah, as the sacrifice is drowned in water, calls upon the name of the God of Israel, and fire consumes the sacrifice. What a mountaintop experience, literally.

As is often the case after such spiritual exhilaration, there set in upon Elijah a deep depression, for he was struggling in a very difficult time in the life of Israel. It was not an easy time to be a prophet of God, and he fled to Mount Horeb or Sinai, the mountain of Moses and the encounter of God with Israel in the Exodus experience. God is not altogether sympathetic with this prophet. He says, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And Elijah pours out his self-pity as though he and he alone is left faithful to God. And then, God says, "Stand in the mouth of the cave," after which Elijah experiences dramatic effects in nature, an earthquake, wind and fire. But, God is not in any of these dramatic displays, but rather, in the sound of sheer silence.

Richard Elliott Friedman, commenting on that passage, notes that that is the point of transition in Israel's experience of God. That experience is the last time it is recorded, "And God said ..." Early on in the scripture story of Israel, God is speaking all the time and acting all the time, but now the sound of sheer silence is a signal that theophany is over and, along with that, is increasing responsibility on the part of humanity to carry on the story. There was a shift, and the writers who put the story together were obviously signaling that shift and that juxtaposition of Carmel and Sinai and silence.

The scriptures signal those cultural shifts in the understanding of God and of reality and of all things that pertain to our human experience, and we know those cultural shifts, as well. In our own Christian tradition, there was a move in those early centuries from classical Greek and Roman culture to a culture that, over a few centuries, became totally shaped by the Christian vision, finding its apex in that high Medieval period, only to be shifted in the Renaissance to a focus from heaven to earth. And after the detour of the 16th century Reformation, there was the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment and the whole Modern period, and that Modern period, of which we are the heirs, saw the rise of secularism and, to large extent, the questioning of God and the undercutting of that faith tradition which had built cathedrals.

Gary Eberle, speaking about our own present Post-Modern situation, points to the cathedral as the symbol of the Modern period, and, as a matter of fact, how the cathedrals of Europe particularly have become more tourist stations than places of worship.

Those of you who have gone on tour with me know that they are always ABC tours, "another bloody cathedral." So, I have been guilty of turning them into tourist places, but not simply tourist places, for we have often stopped and

worshiped in those holy places. Nancy will never forgive me for one Sunday when the two of us were alone in Rome and we spent five hours in St. Peter's, if you can believe it.

It is not as though that holy space does not continue to speak, but there is no question that the cathedral is a monument to the faith of an earlier age and, in modernity, the faith that built the cathedrals has been seriously challenged and in many ways undercut. For the thing that marks the modern age is the rise of critical thinking and the rejection of all forms of authoritarianism, whether it be the authoritarian claim of the Church as institution, or of the tradition as in Eastern Orthodoxy, or of the Bible, as in Protestantism. The thing that marked modernity was that rise of critical thinking, the scientific method, the empirical method of investigation, no longer taking some word from prelate or scriptures or tradition as authoritative, but rather going out and looking at the world, experimenting, probing, investigating, accepting nothing on some authoritative word, but with critical rationality evaluating the evidence. That is what has marked modernity. In large measure, the Modern movement has been a movement very, very seriously weakening the Christian Church.

I sat a couple of weeks ago with the New Testament professor that I studied under in Leiden back in the 60s. He was in the area and called, and I picked him up and we shared a breakfast together, and we talked about the European situation today. For example, in England just 6% of the people go to worship in that land that has these magnificent cathedrals and this grand Anglican tradition. We talked about the Netherlands where he still lives and where I had so many wonderful experiences. I looked across the table and I said to him, "How long can it last?" He said, "Jesus came, in my understanding, not to build the church, but to proclaim the kingdom."

I like that, because what he was saying is what the poet Larkin is saying, that institutions, forms and structures may flourish and flounder. They may rise and pass away. But, somehow or other, there is that within the depths of the human being that will seek out a place like this, a serious place, on serious ground, because no matter how secular, no matter how lacking in any kind of observance, there will now and again, here and there, rise up that which will surprise that hunger and that yearning for the presence of God, for that which is sacred and holy, for that dimension that always accompanies our ordinary human experience, suggesting something more, not a supernatural being "out there" that runs the universe.

I came across the other day a sermon of a year ago when, out in front of our house, a child was drowned in the waves of Lake Michigan, and I remember preaching that Sunday on the pitiless universe. God does not interrupt the rip tide or the raging surf, and God plays no favorites. That understanding of God, if we would be honest, has been undercut by everything that we know, thanks to the natural sciences and the investigation of all of those respective disciplines of

human learning. But, does that mean, because that image of God that has marked our tradition in the past, does that mean, then, that God is dead?

Richard Elliott Friedman, who comments on the Isaiah experience in his book, *The Hidden Face of God*, uses Nietzsche as the prophetic voice of the modern, Nietzsche who said, "God is dead." Nietzsche said it with not any sense of triumphalism. Nietzsche said it in anguish because he said, "God is dead and we have killed God." The modern with all of the wonder and all of the amazement, and all of the fruitfulness that has come to us, to the exercise of critical rationality and the empirical method - all of the wonders of mathematical formulas that have tied our earth into a network of communication creating the possibility of a global community - all of that, all of that without the sense of the presence of God becomes empty and hollow and now and again, here and there, we will be surprised by a hunger because we have been created with a God-shaped hole in our soul.

And so, we have entered into a period of time which is called the Post-Modern period. The Post-Modern period into which we have entered and the periodization of cultural shifts is very untidy, but basically this 20th century has come to see the limitations of human rationality. And so, when medievalism broke apart and authoritarianism was undercut, we entered into the Modern period, and there was a sharp break. When modernity comes to understand its limits, we have called it Post-Modernity, which means it is after the modern. It is not a rejection of the modern, for we had better never reject all of the fruitfulness that has come from critical thinking, from critical rationality, from the use of intelligence, from the mind that probes and investigates. We cannot go back to some authoritarian claim that hears voices from heaven. The exercise of critical intelligence is a continuing and ongoing dimension of the Post-Modern period.

But, Post-Modernism has come to be a time in which it is more and more being recognized that intelligence, thinking which we value so highly here, is not enough. Intelligence and attention, or I could call it awareness. Or, I could call it simply an openness to that which is beyond the limits of our minds to grapple and grasp, an openness to that which is sacred and holy and which permeates the whole of reality so that I would speak of God not as some supernatural being "out there," beyond creation, intervening and tinkering and arranging here and there, arbitrarily and capriciously, but rather the God of whom I would speak naturally as the Soul of the universe, as the creative Spirit that now and again rises into our conscious attention or awareness, taking the time consciously and intentionally to open our lives to that dimension that cannot finally be captured in a syllogism or a mathematical formula or a test-tube, to that dimension that demands a poem or a painting, a sunset or a starry heaven, a gathering with friends in a common search for the touch of God of which Peter spoke earlier, brushed with angels' wings, washed by grace.

How?

Who can tell?

When?

Who could predict?

But awareness that, as I live my ordinary days, what I can see and touch and handle is permeated with something that is always beyond my grasp, that always-present to the soul that seeks and searches and is open, the presence of God. Not in spite of my mind, my intelligence, my probing, my serious thinking, but, when all of that is done, an attention to a reality that once was so beautifully expressed in the stone of a cathedral, but continues here and now to be expressed in a variety of ways.

Mies van derRohe, one of the great architects of the 20th century, who with Frank Lloyd Wright and a couple of others, were the pioneers of the clean lines and objectivity and efficiency of architectural form, was asked shortly before he died, "If you could build what you have never been able to build, what would you build?" (I should note here that post-modernism came to expression first in architecture.) This leading modern architect of form and structure that has marked the city and the skyscraper, this one said shortly before he died, "If I could build what I have never been able to build, I would build a cathedral."

Indeed.

References:

Richard Elliott Friedman. *The Hidden Face of God*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.

"Church Going," by Philip Larkin, in *The Geography of Nowhere: Finding Oneself in the Postmodern World*. Sheed and Ward, 1995.