

The Experience of God

From the series: Spirituality in the Modern World

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 139; Mark 1:9-15 Text: Genesis 1:2; Psalm 139:7; Mark 1:10

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

While I was on vacation, I had time to read the paper. I never bother with it the rest of the year, but there, a cup of coffee and the paper, and Nancy - it is a way to lull away some time. I was reading a couple of papers a day, and in the Sports section there was the talk about the difficulty the Los Angeles Lakers were having, possibly not able to repeat this year the championship because Phil Jackson, the Coach, has a problem. He doesn't have one star, he has two. Any time you have two stars, you have problems, right? You have this hulk of a man called Shaq, who is there because of hulk and some ability, and you have one with incredible athletic ability, Kobe Bryant, and of course, superstars would like to be the center of attention and, consequently, the Lakers' fortunes were not too good at that point. I think they have done a little better since, but I'm not going to hold my breath as to whether or not they repeat, I don't really care. After all, this is Piston territory, although we don't admit it always, but the interesting thing about that disturbance in the Laker lineup was that it reminded me that Phil Jackson, the coach, was a coach with some meditative dimension to him. He had been raised in a fundamentalist Christian home, his parents were both Pentecostal preachers, and one of the worst things that can happen to you when you grow up in a Pentecostal home is if you don't as an adolescent get the "gift," and he never got the "gift." His tongue just kind of laid there and it didn't "take" with Phil and he felt guilty about all of that, but he was a great athlete and he found great success, eventually playing in the NBA himself, and of course, his fame was with the Chicago Bulls. I hate to mention that name in this territory, too, but one has to do what one has to do. Coaching the great Michael Jordan and the Jordanaires, and winning three championships and all of that good stuff. He had a great success record there, and I thought to myself, what is he going to do in Los Angeles?

A friend here gave me a book entitled *Sacred Hoops*, by Phil Jackson, with an Introduction written by then-Senator Bill Bradley. They were both in the NBA together. In *Sacred Hoops*, Phil Jackson tells his story, and it is a very good read, actually. He tells a bit about his very rigid Christian upbringing, which he has not

turned his back on, but to which he has added a touch of Buddhism. He got into a little Zen Buddhism and meditation. He learned how to sit on a cushion and cross his legs and breathe deeply and get mindful. But he was telling that, when he had Michael Jordan on the court, the other players were so enamored with Jordan's moves, that they would just sort of stand there and forget they were part of the team, too. What he had to do was weave them into a team and of course, with an outstanding star like that, that is not so easy, because all of us want to be in the center stage, and how do you create what he said is really a spiritual matter?

Teamwork is a spiritual matter. And so, his own spiritual experience, his experience with contemplation, helped him to enable his players to bond together and to become a team and, of course, the success was evident. The word that Phil Jackson used about his own experience as a Christian, nonetheless, weaves some Buddhist meditation into his life. The word that he used was mindfulness. It's a good word. Mindfulness.

It so happens that the book I was going to use on Tuesday evenings, John Hick's *The Fifth Dimension*, speaks about mindfulness with Hick discussing Buddhism particularly, Hinduism a bit, but particularly Buddhism. Mindfulness, as John Hick says, brings one to total awareness of the moment, when one pauses long enough and, if you want a technique, through the breathing in and breathing out. Seeking to empty the mind of all distractions, one becomes mindful, and this, with practice, can become a way of being; it can pervade more and more of life so that we live in the present moment, not crippled by fears and shame of the past, not paralyzed by anxiety about the future, but being very much alive and alert and aware of the present moment. With practice and the spiritual disciplines, this can become more and more the demeanor of one's life, so that one finds a deeper level of serenity and peacefulness. It's a good word - mindfulness. Being consciously aware, aware of one's self and of one's world in the present moment, being present, here and now, in this moment.

As John Hick says, all of the great religions recognized, in our human experience, some form of distortion. We all know it; we can look into our own lives, we can follow the course of our historical circumstances; the newspaper, the television is full of all kinds of this distortion of human life. As Hick says, you in the Western tradition, of which we are a part, know the story. We tell about that, the story of Adam and Eve created in Paradise, perfect, and their rebellion, their disobedience, their fall into sin. Really, in the biblical story and in the traditional Christian explanation of things, everything that is wrong with the world is a consequence of that original sin, that initial misstep, that sin that brings guilt, that brings alienation, that offends God, that creates the gulf between God and the human person, and the need for redemption, the need for the whole redemptive scheme of things in order that that gulf may be bridged and reconciliation may happen. That is the Christian story; it is the Jewish story, more or less, the idea that the distortion of the human situation is the consequence of sin, bringing guilt, bringing alienation.

But, as Hick points out, and I am sure we are aware, in the eastern religions, it is not a question of sin and guilt and alienation, but rather, the distortion of life is the consequence of false consciousness. We just don't "see" correctly. We just don't "get it." There is a false consciousness and that false consciousness causes me to live as an egocentric being, causes me to live as one who is threatened by the other, causes me to live greedily and graspingly, causes me to follow the instincts that are in me as an animal that has emerged out of the jungle with survival skills. Those skills that enabled the race to preserve itself are still with us very much, because we may be spiritual beings, but we have not divested ourselves of that animal nature, and so we know ourselves to be creatures who are beckoned upward and dragged downward, and we live in that tension. In the east, the insight, the understanding is that failure to live with awareness and with peace is the consequence of a false consciousness. We don't "see" truly; we don't "see" correctly, we don't get the real picture. We distort it because of our egocentricity and all of that which impinges upon us. So, whether it is the Western Christian-Jewish-Islamic traditions, or the Eastern traditions, one explains it one way and another explains it another way; the fact is that they agree on that dis-ease and that distortion.

I really enjoy listening to Boyd Wilson as I am unwinding from my sermons, and it always impresses me, as he presents the other great traditions, how the forms are different, how we do it, how we image it, how we imagine it, and the concepts are different, but it is all the same, really. It is that human situation in a distorted reality. There is that yearning for God, that thirst for the sacred, for the holy, that love of peace and wholeness that seems always to elude us. And so, in one story or another, in one tradition or another, we are dealing very much with the same thing.

It does seem to me frankly that, from what we have learned from science about reality, about the natural world, about the universe, our cosmology today which is totally different than the cosmology of the biblical writers, our cosmology really fits a lot better with an eastern insight, because we are emerging. We are a part of the process. Fifteen billion years from "Big Bang," here we are, creatures who have become conscious, and in the Buddhist understanding and in the eastern tradition, it is not that God is "out there," God the creator who is some kind of craftsman or engineer who put this thing together; but rather, God is in the process, the creator- Spirit, the creative spirit, and this process which has come to expression in us so that we are actually the consciousness of the cosmos. With us the cosmos gets a voice, with us the cosmos comes to awareness, and we are able to be aware of and to articulate and name the wonder and the mystery of the whole creation. Here we are and God is in us, because as God is in all reality, with all of the great traditions affirmed, so God is in us. And so, I think, frankly, the eastern traditions have an edge on our western tradition in the fact that they have always looked inside, not outside, for God. The experience of God is within. You don't go beyond, but rather, into the depths of one's own soul and recognize that we are the unique human expressions of God.

Now, here, let me tip you off - this is a dangerous statement. This will keep you thinking for a while. Are you ready?

Could it be that self-awareness is the experience of God? Could it be that if I really came to the awareness of the depths of my humanness, that I would be contemplating God? The images of God that we have are terribly important for the way we think and the way we behave and how we feel about ourselves. If God is offended by my sin and my guilt and alienated from me, if God is a lawgiver and judge, then I may well feel in the universe like Phil Jackson felt in his own family home when he didn't get the "gift," not measuring up. Falling short. Unworthy.

But, if, on the other hand, I am the universe come to consciousness, or another way of saying, if I am that sacred coming to awareness, if I am the human expression of the eternal god, then I am a part of the whole. Then there is no separation or alienation. I may still get myself into all of the rotten mess into which humanity can get itself, but it will be a consequence of false consciousness, not that God is angry with me, but that I have failed to see who I am. The wonder, the mystery of being the self expression of God, and that perception of things can make a huge difference in how I feel about myself and about God and about the whole of reality.

All of these things are in all of the great traditions and certainly what I am suggesting is a little bit radical. It isn't often said quite that blatantly and bluntly, that self-consciousness is really God-consciousness, that self-awareness is awareness of the divine within, but it is in our tradition - "The Spirit of God brooded over the deep," in the creation story, or of hovering over the deep, brooding, creating. Psalm 139 - is there anything more beautiful than that? Isn't it a powerful expression of the experience of God, the God who is closer than our breath? "Thou hast searched me, O God, and known me. Where can I flee from thy presence? Night and day are the same to you. You formed me in my mother's womb. I am wonderfully and mysteriously made."

And then the anger at those on the other side, "Why don't you slay them," only to come back to that moment of awareness to say, "Search me, O God. Know my heart." Beautiful! Powerful! So, it's in there, even though the imagery both in Genesis and the Psalmist is still that image of God "out there," or a kind of supernatural theism; nonetheless, the sense of intimacy is there, the presence when God is there.

But, what about Jesus? Jesus coming to his baptism, joining the John the Baptist movement? Of course, if Jesus is the divine intruder, the second person of the Trinity, dipping down here to do the job for us, to get us fixed up with God again, then you can see his baptism as something other, but we have come to think about Jesus in the genuine, authentic humanity in which I believe he is portrayed, Jesus in the social context of his day, Jesus living in a time when there was exploitation, when there was oppression, when the heel of Imperial Rome

was wringing all of the life out of the peasant class, when the cities were expanding and commercialism was expanding, and people were suffering in hopelessness and helplessness. It was in that kind of a context that Jesus came on the scene and joined John the Baptist, who was a rabid apocalyptic who said, "This is so dark and this is so black, God must soon come to damn the wicked and vindicate the righteousness." Jesus identified with John, not in a vacuum but, in a real historical, social, economic situation, Jesus identified with that movement. Interestingly, as he is driven off into the wilderness, we're told in the gospel story, he struggles in the wilderness with the evil one; he wrestles. What did he wrestle with? "Who am I? Who is God? What am I about? What is my calling, what is my mission? Is John right? I don't feel right with John."

And he leaves the wilderness temptation and the power of the Holy Spirit and what does he proclaim, doom and gloom about to happen? No, he proclaims the good news, the year of the Lord's favor, and he is able to communicate with those people who had not a prayer that they were people of dignity, they were human, they were people of worth, they were children of God, they were children of the covenant, and they flocked to him because he gave them some reason to live, some meaning. He was a prophet, but he had that word for that moment, and they knew it was true. He gave people again the sense of human dignity and worth. Filled with the spirit.

What was he? He was God-aware, he was self-aware. He taught them to see God in the lilies of the field and the sparrows. He taught them that God is as close as their breath. With that, one would have thought that Jesus might have been a Buddhist.

The experience of God is always so difficult to nail down. I got a call in the middle of last evening from my old friend, Bud Ridder, who has preached for us here. He said, "What are you preaching on tomorrow?" I said, "Oh, God." I told him it's not easy trying to preach out of a whole new paradigm. I could make it so much easier for myself. He said, "Oh, I know." I said, "You know, I got so desperate a moment ago that I actually sat with my eyes closed and checked out my breathing for at least two minutes." You see, I'm really the worst one in the world to be talking about this because it has never worked for me. I've never had a decent prayer life. I can't meditate. I want to talk ideas. I want to keep it on an intellectual level. So, I'm the worst one in the world to try to be telling you about this, and I stumble and stammer because there is something here.

If Jesus were to come today, what would he say to us? I wonder if, once again, he'd be the one with the word that connected because the time was right. I wonder if he would suggest to us that rolling blackouts in California are a sign of things to come. I wonder if he might say, "You know those rolling blackouts in California? What you really need to do is just generate more energy. Just find oil wherever it is. It doesn't matter where it is, whether it's in a nice, natural environment or not, just get the energy going, keep the industry going to keep the

consumption going, because haven't you learned from your television set that you really are consumers? The television stations that are owned by the producers who push the goods to make us think that we will be less than human if we don't have it all?" Jesus would probably say, "Just find more energy. Rape the earth." Now, it's true that only a small percentage of earth's children are profiting by that and most of earth's children are living in poverty and hunger, and it's also true that, if you keep going at that rate, you're going to devastate the natural environment, but what the hell? You'll be dead."

That's probably what Jesus would say, eh? We'd certainly hear something different from him, wouldn't we? We'd have to kill him again. You bet we would.

I don't imagine that Ralph Nader is of the stature of Jeremiah or Isaiah, but it was interesting to me how the political parties, Republican and Democrat both, aligned with the fact that he was the enemy. I mean, he disrupts things. Life is good when it's in the hands of the power brokers of the age. Then they can play us. Then they can make us puppets and we just kind of go along with the flow. Here's a guy who has the audacity to ruin an election.

Well, what's all that got to do with anything? It has a lot to do with the experience of God. I think Jesus would have something to say to us and I think some day someone will come with a word. Look what happened in India with Gandhi, that little Indian man. He talked about non-violent resistance and catalyzed a whole people. Sometime, when the time is right, and the right words spoken, things change. Unfortunately, however, most of us good people are so invested in the present that even when we begin to see it, we fight it. Now, I'm a part of that problem because if Cisco, Oracle, Intel, Microsoft, Exxon, Mobil, Sony, Motorola, and Compaq do not do well, you're going to have an aging preacher and his wife on your hands. You're going to have to take care of us. We're invested, folks. You see, I'm not pointing any fingers. It's just something to think about.

The experience of God comes in moments of self-awareness, when I realize that it is not my game, but I am a part of some wonderful, mysterious whole, that my life is bound into the bundle of life, and that God is present, the God of the beginning, the God of the end, and the God who is with us in the meantime, and if I can ever see, by God, I will see, and it will be God in me.

References:

John Hick. *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*. Oneworld Publications, 1999.

Phil Jackson. *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*. Hyperion, 1995.