

Holy Smoke:

Ancient Forms; Fresh Expressions

Text: Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 5:13

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I remember it as though it were yesterday. I had occasion to visit overnight the city of Pittsburgh and, wandering down in the midst of the metropolitan area, there was a church and I rather naturally walked into the church. As I walked in, however, I had an experience for which I was not prepared. Something happened to me. I was overcome with the beauty of it all. I still remember the pillars that soared heavenward, melting into high, vaulted arches. I remember the stained glass window through which filtered the soft light of twilight, predominantly blue. I remember the altar, the candles. That was sacred space. And in that moment I was transfixed; I was transported out of myself; I had an aesthetic experience that mediated to me the Holy. The Holy Other.

It was my first experience, even though I had been in the ministry some years by then – it was the first time that I had ever stood in awe, affected thus by space, sacred space. The experience changed me because I had grown up in a tradition that prided itself on having thrown off all of the trappings of the Roman Catholic tradition in the Reformation of the 16th century. I think the only thing the Dutch Calvinists didn't throw out was the organ. Thank God for that. The Heidelberg Catechism said God's people will be taught, not through images and pictures, but through the lively preaching of the Word. The architecture of the Reformation Church was symbolic; the pulpit was in the center on which lay the open Word of God, which was the means by which the congregation was to be nurtured. There was an almost total lack of sense of how beauty, architecture, well-crafted, and symbols, well-appointed, can be a means of communicating the Holy. Not a word was spoken on that evening in Pittsburgh, but it was a transforming moment for me. I learned something. And it caused me to reflect on my own experience.

Some years ago in the city of Leiden in The Netherlands, I was wandering about and I went into a church. It was a Reformed Church, the Highland Church, a great big structure that towered over the town. It had been redone inside. It was stark and sterile. It was whitewashed. It was stone; it was simplicity itself, and there was a certain strength and power about it, but the best word I could use to describe it is sterile. I wandered on down the street to the Roman Catholic

Church and it was like entering a warm, embracing womb, and in that experience I understood the contrast between my tradition and the tradition that had been repudiated, and I recognized that the Reformation was a reaction, and reactionary movements always lose more than they gain.

I had come to Pittsburgh from Midland Park, New Jersey. My apologies to those who are present from that congregation this morning, but let me say, in coming there, I found exactly what I had been used to in the Reformed tradition, only worse. There was this little church and then they needed more room, and so they knocked this wall out. Now the church was wider than it was long. But, if you knocked the wall out, how do you hold the ceiling up? Well, you plunk a couple of pillars right in the aisle. We called them Aaron and Hur, the two guys who held Moses' arms up in prayer while Israel fought the battle. There they were. Ugly, iron poles! And it was rather low-ceilinged. You'd walk into that church and there was absolutely not a chance in the world that you would ever say, "Ah!" No, if all depended on the preacher, there's no preacher that is equal to a task like that.

I went to a seminar down at McCormick Seminary a few years ago, a Presbyterian school. The Lutheran theologian, a great, great scholar, Joseph Sittler, was lecturing on the Apostles' Creed, and as an aside, he said, "You know, you Presbyterians always come at it through the head, whereas the Catholic tradition comes at it intuitively, through pageantry, through color, through scent and sight." And it was like a light bulb went on for me and I recognized the possibility of combining the best of the Reformation tradition with that which had always characterized the Roman Catholic tradition, and characterizing the Roman Catholic tradition would be also characterizing the Temple of Israel where the space, the sacred space already preached, where the sacred space communicated a sense of the Holy, and that entering the space, one was immediately aware that one was in a place set apart where now and then, here and there, God would be met, as it were, face-to-face.

Mine has been a long pilgrimage of having to come to understand that the experience in which we are now engaged is an experience which potentially offers us an encounter with God, an encounter with God which is an experience unspeakable. Now, you see the ridiculous nature of what I am presently engaged in. I am speaking about the unspeakable. I am trying to portray the ineffable. I am attempting through reasoned discourse to point to an experience that is beyond conceptual description. And what I am trying to do is to invite you to reflect on what we are really engaged in in these moments.

I don't denigrate preaching, for I believe that it is important that there be a reflection on experience. I do not believe that the heart can long rest where the mind cannot follow, and if we have feeling periods, it can soon degenerate into sentimentality and maudlin mush. I am not denigrating the thinking dimension of faith. But, I want to say to you this morning that the very heart and center of a community of faith is an experience in which we open our lives to the touch of the

living God Who is not at our disposal, Whom we cannot manipulate, Whose touch we cannot command, but before Whom we open our lives in prayerful anticipation that there might be a transforming moment such as I experienced quite unexpectedly walking into a magnificent holy space. Such that might happen to you this morning through the phrase of a hymn or the sound of the organ or a line of an anthem or a paragraph of the prayer, or the moment of placing baptismal water on a beautiful child - that moment when there would be a catch in your throat and a tear in the eye.

Last Tuesday there was a journalist here from *The Chicago Tribune* who wanted to cover our story, and I spent a couple of hours with him. He's an Orthodox Jew. He said to me, as all of us feel we must confess to priests and pastors and rabbis, "I'm not as observant as I ought to be." "But," he said, "when I go to synagogue, I go to the orthodox synagogue, because when I go..." (I mean, like he was saying, "If I am going to go, after all, I want something that will grab me.") And then he told me a bit of his own story, how he shares his life with a woman who is a pure rationalist, born of Communist parents, committed atheists; she herself is atheist, who believes anything beyond the parameters of human reason doesn't exist and isn't valid. He said, "Do you know what it's like to share your life with a pure rationalist?"

I said, "No, not really. My wife cries easily."

But, coming to Christ Community, he had read all of the news reports, and so he was expecting to meet in me someone similar to his wife, a kind of a rationalist, a reasoning sort, one heavy on thought and short on mystery. And I tried to say to him that's not who I am and that's not who Christ Community is. I said we are a passionate people with deep commitment, and we bow before the Mystery that is beyond us and we acknowledge the mystery of human suffering and that whole dimension of human experience, which is beyond our ability to reduce to a neat formula. We had a wonderful conversation for a couple of hours, and then I took him through the building and we ended here, in the sanctuary. I turned the chancel lights on; we walked through the doors and down the center aisle, and about in the middle of the center aisle, he stopped and said, "Oh! This is beautiful. This is a Christian Church!"

And I said, "Yes, it is."

I was so pleased that this sacred space, even without all of you beautiful people, but with its appointments, with its height, with those symbols that speak to us of long-treasured traditions, that it grabbed him and he could identify this place as a place where just possibly one might be grabbed. And that's really rather a good description of that which we pray happens to us as we come here without our being able to predict it or guarantee it, coming upon us unexpectedly, sometimes in the strangest ways.

Have you known it? That moment when suddenly there was that which washed over you and you were quite overwhelmed, when you, as it were, lost control, when you experienced vulnerability, recognizing the fragility of your existence, and then, because we have been nurtured in the grace of God and in that grace manifested in Jesus, we know that that Mystery into which we are caught up is a gracious, loving Mystery, and yet an awesome Mystery, full of majesty.

It doesn't happen every Sunday. I know that. And for some, it may almost never happen. But, now and again, here and there, with this one or that one, there are those moments when we are taken out of ourselves and stretched beyond ourselves and experience ourselves being uplifted, transported. And an experience like that is enough. Just a moment like that will do quite well. An authentic moment like that, once in a while, will do for a lifetime. And we may return again and again and never be able to duplicate the experience. And yet, because we deal with the living God, we stand always in the potential of that in-breaking, or that emerging, or that overwhelming.

It seems as though crises enable us more readily to be thus encountered. That's the way it was with Isaiah.

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and lifted up, and the whole temple shook in its foundation."

Can't you see it? The vivid imagery; the temple filled with smoke, the smoke of the incense? The altar, the priests in their robes, and suddenly that whole space was filled with the majesty of God, the One Who sits on the throne, Whose train filled the temple.

"I saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and I heard the angels sing, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.'"

And then, of course, that immediate response: "Woe is me, for I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Ah, but in the vision, the angel takes tongs and a coal from off the altar and touches his lips and says, "Your guilt is removed."

And then, as again is a very natural, normal kind of scenario, thus encountered, thus transformed, thus cleansed, the voice is heard, "Who will go for us? Whom shall we send?"

The only authentication of a genuine experience of God is that which follows in the wake of it. The prophet says, "Here am I. Send me."

The worship in heaven modeled after that worship in the temple, I'm sure. The writer John, in his vision, sees into the very heaven of heavens and he hears myriads and myriads and thousands and thousands of angels singing, "Worthy is

the Lamb, and Power and Glory and Wealth and Honor to the One Who sits on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever."

You see, the Bible is full of that imagery. It's imagery! It's the only way one can stammeringly give witness to the ineffable experience of being caught up and overwhelmed and over washed with the Holy One.

The journalist from *The Chicago Tribune* had followed the mega-church phenomenon; he had been to Willow Creek outside of Chicago, probably the most successful church in the country with masses of people coming, fantastic programming reaching a broad spectrum of human need. Don't hear what I'm going to say in any sense as a critique of that or a criticism of that, but as he said to me and as I have read myself, when you come up to the campus, you wouldn't know but what you were coming to the corporate headquarters of IBM. No cross, no banners, no organ; none of the traditional trappings of the Christian tradition or the Jewish tradition because there is an intentional attempt to reach those for whom all of this has no connection.

We're at a point of new beginnings at Christ Community. We're on the threshold of a wonderful, new experience. But, I want to say to you at this point of new beginnings, that we will not jettison the ancient forms. We'll always seek to bring them to fresh expression. We'll always attempt to have the voice be contemporary, but it will be the ancient tradition and the old symbols, because I am not sure that every medium and mode can carry the weight, the weight of the glory of God. I am not sure that all of the present experimentation in much of the Church is not a desperate flailing in an attempt to find a way to success when, finally, there are some postures, there are some modes, there are some media that lend themselves to creating the transcendent moment. And there are others that I suspect can only be called pure entertainment.

On the threshold of new beginnings, I am committed to worship that is full of grandeur, that is alive with glory, that will lift us into the presence of the Holy One, for I do believe that, finally, in the depths of our soul, what we long for more than anything else, is just a moment in which we are held in the gracious embrace of the Eternal God, and we know that whatever other hell is breaking loose, nonetheless, all will be well. This place is committed to worship that ushers us into the Mystery and the Majesty of the Eternal God, and there is nothing more wonderful.