

Living Before the Face of God: The Personal Dimension

From the series: Meeting God Again For the First Time

Text: Genesis 3:10; Psalm 130:1, 4; Psalm 132:1; Philippians 3:12

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

About three weeks ago, our house began to tremble and a check out the window revealed that, down the driveway next door just south of us, lumbered a great big Cat, some kind of heavy equipment. It had a steel arm that seemed two stories high that came, finally, to an iron jaw. The next morning the engine roared, the Cat positioned itself in front of the home that had sat next to ours as long as we had been there. The arm went up, the jaw came down on the flat-roofed dwelling and punctured through it, here, there, in another place – through that roof like it was nothing but tar paper. And then the arm raised up and the jaw moved over and down to the side and simply nudged the wall in and another wall in and another wall in, and before one knew it, that which had been a home in which to dwell was lying in fractured rubble on the basement floor. And then those jaws reached down and hungrily grasped all of the shattered fragments, lifting them up and depositing them in a dump truck that was waiting. Once all of the rubble was out of that floor, once again the arm rose up and moved over to the side of that poured concrete wall and just went, "Poof, poof, poof," and then crrrunched those slabs of concrete until again the jaws could come down and pick up the pieces and put them also in the truck and, within a day's time, where a dwelling had been there was now simply a vacant lot, a sandbox.

Demolition. Deconstruction. Dramatic. Changing the landscape. Not just for the fun of it, but in order that in that place there might rise a new dwelling, to the end that my tax appraisal will go up.

Deconstruction, demolition is a part of the human experience in order that there might be reconstruction, new construction. An old and inadequate dwelling was demolished in order that a new house might arise more adequate to the moment, to the time, to the person. And, as I experienced that event, I saw an analogy of my ministry, a ministry of deconstruction, perhaps even demolition – I hope not with the brutality of that iron Cat. Nonetheless, for the same purpose.

The analogy breaks down at one point. In the case of the house, there was total demolition, total clearing of the space before the new construction could begin. In

the case of my teaching and preaching ministry, it is necessary, obviously, that there be deconstruction and, simultaneously, construction, that there be dismantling and, at the same time, mantling anew, lest we be left for a time with no place to dwell. But, the purpose is the same, and the deconstruction and the dismantling that must always take place in terms of our faith dwelling is not in order to demolish, but to clear the space for something new and more adequate to our ongoing knowledge and human experience.

It has always been that way in the faith journey of the people of God. Jesus stood in the line of the Hebrew prophets. Jesus was born a Jew and died a Jew. His devotion, his worship, his communion with God was within the parameters of his Jewish experience. But he reached into that structured religious establishment and rearranged some rooms and created some new spaces, challenging the conventional wisdom that had moved God afar off. He brought God near, the unbrokered presence of the God Who was accessible to all. And, of course, he paid for it with his life.

It was the same throughout 2000 years of church history, but perhaps nowhere more dramatically than in the 16th century. We are the children of the Reformation, that disruptive event in the life of the church that tragically tore asunder the body of Christ, and yet necessarily dismantled and deconstructed an institution that had become overlain with forms and structures that blocked and hindered and obstructed the flow of the grace of God rather than aiding that flow.

It must have been difficult for people in the 16th century, at the time itself. I think, for example, of those who came to the altar for the bread and the cup, believing that when the bell sounded at the altar and the priest invoked the spirit of God there was a miracle that occurred, the transubstantiation of the bread and the wine into body and blood, literally. Martin Luther had a hard time moving away from that. His fine distinction was that the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine, but the body is above and around and under the physical element that doesn't change. Similarly with the cup, so that over against the transubstantiation of the Roman church, the Lutheran tradition had consubstantiation, *con*, that prefix that means "with." The body was with the bread; the blood was with the cup. I suppose there were those who were troubled when John Calvin suggested that it is neither transubstantiation nor consubstantiation, but rather that Christ is present spiritually when one receives bread and cup with faith.

I suppose there were those who brought their children to the baptismal font and got the baptism executed and breathed a sigh of relief because the Catholic tradition taught that the child was born with original sin and that in the baptismal act, the grace of God removed the original sin and gave the child a fresh possibility, a new start, a start for the first time, as it were. I suppose there were those who were troubled when they brought their child to the baptismal font in Geneva, only to learn that there was no automatic grace attached to the act, for

the sacramentarian conception of things had been altered to where it was now the prayer and the faith that engaged the promise and brought the grace, but without that automatic guarantee.

Throughout the history of the church, as human knowledge has expanded and human experience has grown, and reflection on the faith has continued, there has been that ongoing deconstruction, not in order to leave us naked and bare, but in order to clothe us anew with that which is more adequate, which is in accord with the broader spectrum of our human experience, so that one need not check one's mind at the door and come in for mindless ritual or devotion but, rather, that one with mind and heart according well might offer one's whole being to God.

In these fall weeks we are re-imagining God, not simply because new is better or old is no longer valid in every case, but in order that we might meet God again for the first time, in order that we might have a fresh experience of the living God, a taste of new wine, that we might experience the presence of God, the illumination, the light of God on our total experience in a whole new way in order that it might be deeper and richer, in order that it might engage our whole being and our life of worship and our life generally might flow out of a center within us that is whole, in order that there might be cohesiveness in our life.

Living before the face of God - that's the purpose. That's the end of our thinking and our rethinking. Our thinking and our rethinking are vitally important, but are always a step removed from what really matters. What really matters is the communion of the soul with God. What really matters is that we might live with that peace of God within us, that we might live with a kind of confidence and strength and serenity in the conscious awareness of the presence of God in whom we live and move and have our being.

Sometimes it's necessary to deconstruct some of our images and some of our systems and doctrines, because they become blocks. They no longer fit with that which we experience otherwise. They no longer illumine our lives, but they become, if they can be continued, just rote exercises that we do out of custom or superstition, rather than that which we do thoughtfully, with awareness, with attentiveness. Finally, all that we do here together is only for one purpose - that we might live before the face of God in a relationship that is personal.

Let us be clear about that. What we are engaged in here week after week is sometimes a matter of deconstructing, but never as an end in itself, but always to aid and abet that living, personal relationship with God which is at the heart and center of our religion. The function of religion is the hatching of the heart; it is the opening of the self to the sense of the sacred, to the holy, to God. And in order to make that accessible, available, in order to create the environment, the setting in which that may happen, we stammer and stumble and we re-imagine, sometimes involving dismantling, but always in order to be mantled afresh with a sense of the gracious, living God.

The images we carry of God, as we have noted, are terribly important. That Genesis story pictures the Garden of Eden, that blissful place in which the human persons are placed, protected, innocent, and unaware. The image of God in that old Hebrew myth which is so profound in portraying our human experience, our relationship with God, conveys the image of a God Who comes into the garden from outside, Whose very presence brings with it fear and guilt to the human person who has engaged in that inevitable human act of wondering, experimenting.

The church, I think, has missed the point of that garden scene, particularly through the interpretation of St. Paul. The experience of experimentation, that transgression, the coloring outside of the lines is called "the Fall." As a matter of fact, there is part of the liturgy of the church that recognizes that there was something more going on there. It is called The Paradox of the Fortunate Fall, because obviously that which evolved in the human being following that transgression was gain along with the pain. There was that inquisitiveness that brought knowledge and awareness and fear and guilt. There is in that story a reflection of that which is endemic to the human person, a sense of fear and guilt, a sense of treading over boundaries. Dwelling east of Eden now involves alienation and estrangement. Yet, who could say that they should have stayed within Eden in that innocent unawareness?

In the Hebrew tradition, the images of God were churned as they wrestled with the concrete experience of their life in the presence of this Creator God Who could only be conceived of as sovereign lord and king in a hierarchical society that was structured from the top down. Yet, there was also a sense of the grace of God. The Psalmist, in Psalm 130, speaks out of the depths. Have you ever been in the depths? Have you ever had to cry out of the depths?

Out of the depths I cry to you, O God. O God, if you should mark iniquity, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.

And the forgiveness creates hope and newness.

Here we have one model, one experience, but the experience of a personal relationship with God, the sense that there is a grace that embraces even the one who in the depths, in the crisis, feels estranged, alienated.

The next Psalm is a poem of serenity out of creaturely humility, the human person being what the human person ought to be, not lifting up the eyes, not raising the sights too high, not haughty of spirit, and consequently, in that acceptance of the human condition, experiencing the presence of God as a child nursing at the mother's breast. "O God, my soul is serene." Serenity through the awareness of God Who is Creator and I a creature.

But, there are also people like Paul whose lives are going down the road one way and who have an experience, cataclysmic and dramatic that turns them around in their tracks and, whatever that vision of Jesus involved, it issued in the transformation of Paul's life. Was it for him also a moment of awareness? Did he suddenly see everything in a moment? What he saw clearly was that religious structures are transcended in that kind of experience. His wrath was raised when religious people came in after him, into the communities that he had formed, like the community in Philippi, with "religion." He calls them dogs; "Beware of the dogs, the mutilators of the flesh."

Paul has been pictured in a thousand sermons as a classic case of conversion, obviously from Judaism to Christianity. It's just not so. Paul in the 3rd chapter of Philippians denigrates not at all his Jewish experience. It was a very positive experience. It was a very adequate experience. It had the potential for mediating to Paul the God of Israel. But that mystical encounter which he had, relativized it, until he came to see, not Christianity, but the possibility, the experience of the reality of the communion of the soul with God. He was born a Jew and he died a Jew. He would never have sensed himself to be anything else, but I think he would have said, "It's not so important that I'm a Jew anymore," and I don't think he had the foggiest idea that he would be the founder of Christianity, which he was. Jesus didn't found Christianity. Paul did. But he would have said the form doesn't matter, because religion is not a ritual form or a doctrinal system.

The experience of God transcends religious ritual and doctrine. All is transcended in the communion of the soul with God. Once the soul has been indelibly marked, when it has been seared with the seal of the presence of God, the reality of God, then all religious form and structure is relativized. Then use it or put it aside. But know that, in a moment of awareness, the presence, the embrace, the undergirding, the overshadowing of God – of the sacred and the holy that permeates the whole of reality – sustains, succors and nurtures and nourishes us.

So, where are you? That was God's question to that first couple cowering in the bushes. "Where are you?"

"Hiding."

"Why are you hiding?"

"Well, we decided to be human."

God knows our frame. God remembers that we are human. God made us that way. God didn't create this whole vast cosmos and all the myriad millions of humankind in order with a blast of God's breath to damn it all. God is the One in whom we live and move and have our being, who says, "Where are you?"

Why don't you just stop for a moment, for just for a moment. You could become aware, if you could just hear you are loved. If you could just break through as

Paul broke through and finally see that, if God is for us, who could be against us? That there is nothing in life or death or principalities or powers or things present or things to come, nothing in the heights or the depths, nothing in all creation that could ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. If for just a moment you could become aware, it would transform us forever and enable us to rest from our restlessness and be reborn with an energy that, with the Apostle Paul, we would say, "I press on with joy, seeking to grasp that which has grasped me."