

God and Life's Mysteries

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Transfiguration of the Lord, February 5, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Psalm 99; Luke 9:28-36.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Only days before Abraham Lincoln's assassination on Good Friday, April 14, 1865 Lincoln had a dream which he shared with some friends. He said, "About ten days ago, I retired very late. I'd been waiting up for important dispatches. I could not have been long in bed when I fell into a slumber, for I was weary. I soon began to dream. There seemed to be a deathlike stillness about me. Then I heard subdued sobs, as if a number of people were weeping. I thought I left my bed and wandered downstairs.

"There the silence was broken by the same pitiful sobbing, but the mourners were invisible. I went from room to room. No living person was in sight, but the same mournful sounds of distress met me as I passed along. It was light in all the rooms; every object was familiar to me, but where were all the people who were grieving as if their hearts would break?

"I was puzzled and alarmed. What could be the meaning of all this? Determined to find the cause of a state of things so mysterious and so shocking, I kept on until I arrived in the East Room, which I entered. There I met with a sickening surprise. Before me was a casket, on which rested a corpse in funeral vestments. Around it were stationed soldiers who were acting as guards; and there was a throng of people, some gazing mournfully upon the corpse, whose face was covered, others weeping pitifully.

"'Who is dead in the White House?' I demanded of one of the soldiers.

"'The President,' was his answer. 'He was killed by an assassin.'

"Then came a loud burst of grief from the crowd, which awoke me from

my dream. I slept no more that night, and, although it was only a dream, I have been strangely annoyed by it ever since."

Mysterious things like that still happen. On the night my father died my mother had a strange experience. He was in the hospital. My mother came home and went to bed after visiting my father. Sometime after midnight she dreamed the phone was ringing. She answered it and all she heard was the voice of someone who said, "One, sixty five." That's all. She then woke from the dream when the telephone really did begin to ring. She answered it and someone from the hospital told her to come in immediately. She called my brother who picked her up and on the way to the hospital she told him about her strange dream. When they got there it was close to 2 o'clock in the morning. She saw my dad and then he died. The doctor marked the time of his death. 2:05 A.M. My mother turned to my brother and said, "2:05! That's the same as One, sixty five!"

I'm sure that many of you have also had mysterious experiences. When something like this happens you may not even think of it as a religious experience. According to an article by Andrew Greeley about one fifth of the people in the US report having paranormal experiences *frequently*. Greeley defines paranormal as psychic, mystic and contact-with-the-dead experiences. The most common experience is the experience of *deja vu*, the feeling that you've been in the same situation previously. Another paranormal experience is extrasensory perception, communications between people without using our five senses. Another experience is clairvoyance, the ability to see an event occurring far away. Still another is the experience of contact with the dead which is reported by 27 percent of the people in the US. This rising acceptance of paranormal experiences is closely associated with the New Age Religious movement popularized by

Shirley MacClain.

Human nature longs for contact with the spiritual and if people don't encounter the living God in the fellowship of believers, then they're likely to seek spiritual contact elsewhere. They'll turn to horoscopes, ouija boards, tarot cards, mediums and channels and all sorts of strange mystical religions which hold out the promise of contact with the spiritual world.

The prophets and apostles of Jesus warned that counterfeit religious experiences abound. Some of you may have read in the newspapers recently of how counterfeit nuts and bolts were sold to aircraft companies who used them in the construction of airplanes. They look like the real nuts and bolts but they don't meet the required safety specifications. They ~~may work for a while but they've also been responsible for air crashes.~~

Some religious experiences are like that. I believe than any religious experience that bypasses the historic Christ of Scriptures or which puts Christ in the same category as Moses and Elijah or Shirley MacClaine or anyone else is a counterfeit religious experience that's bound to lead to spiritual disaster. The apostle John wrote, "Test the Spirits to see if they're of God."

I remember hearing John Savage, a Methodist minister, once say how he'd met a young girl, a member of Rev. Moon's, Unification Church, in an air terminal selling flowers for that organization. She had a glassy eyed look and a trance-like smile that's so common on the faces of people involved in cults. Savage said to the girl, "I know you've found something that really makes you feel that you've contacted God. But someday you're going to come down from this mountain top experience and you might need someone to talk to. Here's my card. If that time ever comes I want you to

call me *collect* and I'll put you in touch with some people who've experienced the reality of God, not only on the mountain tops, but in the valleys as well."

The cults hold a strange and seductive attraction to many people because they promise mysterious experiences with the spiritual. But the Bible also contains accounts of paranormal experiences. The face of Moses shined when he came down from Mt Sinai. Peter, James and John saw the appearance of Jesus altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And two men talked with him (two men who'd died hundreds of years before). They spoke about the death of Jesus that would soon take place in Jerusalem. "Then a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'" It was a terrifying experience for Peter, James and John

Many Presbyterians are terrified of any kind of religious experiences like that. We're more comfortable *thinking* about God or trying to do God's will than experiencing God. We don't want to have those kinds of experiences and if they force themselves on us we, so often, try to explain them away. David H. C. Read of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian church recently said that so many of us have been captivated by an evolutionary philosophy. We have a tendency to see the advance of religion through the centuries as a kind of development in which religion gradually but steadily discards the supernatural and the miraculous, leaving us with a watered down Christianity that simply urges everybody to be good.

Those of you who know me very well know that I'm not pleading for a religion of sudden and spectacular religious experiences. There are many people who've never had a dramatic religious experience in whose daily

life the light of Christ shines steadily and is nourished by the disciplines of prayer and worship. But who hasn't known a moment when God seems much nearer, more real; or when Christ shines into our hearts with a new power and transforming grace?

The Swiss Reformed Minister, Karl Barth was conducting a seminar in Basel, Switzerland years ago. He began with a single question: 'What is the Church?' And then he waited. After a long silence, an American student raised his hand. "Fellowship" he said. And Barth exploded, "Fellowship? You mean coffee and buns on Sunday morning! Chatter about anything and everything?" Then he stopped. "The Church," he said "is Christ. The Body of Christ." The Church is here as the Body of Christ, to confront us all with this supreme revelation of God-- not just to *talk* about it but to *know* it.

Barth talked alot about the revelation of God as something that comes "vertically from above" meaning that we don't reach an understanding of God by religious study or by religious practices but by the invasion of our lives by God's Son who claims us for his own. Until we turn to the Lord our faces are veiled. We don't really know or understand who God is. But when we turn to the Lord Jesus ^{as He is revealed in the Gospel} (crucified and risen from the dead) the veil is lifted and with unveiled faces we begin to see the *glory* of the crucified God. We begin to see who ^{Christ} ~~God~~ really is. ^{we begin to see who God really is.} And in seeing God in Christ we're changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.

Barth reminds us that the Bible doesn't simply bring us interesting ideas about God and stories illustrating how we're supposed to live. Rather in the Bible, God speaks to us. That's why we call it the 'Word of God. And when God speaks to us God always points us to Christ, crucified and risen from the dead. He says, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to

him!"

Let us pray: Grant, O Living God, that we may have the ears to hear and the eyes to see when the Gospel of Jesus Christ comes to us, and help us to respond so that turning to the Lord we might behold the glory of the Lord, and be changed progressively, from day to day, into his likeness. Amen.

Jim Bishop, The Day Lincoln Died.

Morton Kelsey, Transcendance.

Morton Kelsey, Myths, Dreams and Religion.

David H.C. Read, A Bolt From the Blue, February 14, 1988.