

God Talk

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Dr. Forrest Church



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God Talk

FIRST READING: Psalm 139:1-13 (King James Version)

O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me,
Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising;
Thou understandest my thought afar off.
Thou searchest out my path and my lying down,
And art acquainted with all my ways.
For there is not a word in my tongue,
But, lo, O lord, thou knowest it altogether.
Thou hast beset me behind and before,
And laid thy hand upon me.
It is high, I cannot attain unto it.
Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there:
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou are there.
If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
Even there shall thy hand lead me,
And thy right hand shall hold me,
If I say, Surely the darkness shall overwhelm me,
And the light about me shall be night;
Even the darkness hideth not from thee,
But the night shineth as the day:
The darkness and the light are both alike to thee.
For thou didst form my inward parts:
Thou didst cover me in my mother's womb.

SECOND READINGS:

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow
Of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went
 down to New Orleans and I've seen its muddy bosom turn
 all golden in the sunset.
I've known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
 (*I've Known Rivers,* Langston Hughes)

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and
 day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic
 measures.
It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the
 earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into
 tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.
It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth
 and death, in ebb and in flow.
I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world
 of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages
 dancing in my blood this moment.
 (*The Stream Of Life,* Rabindranath Tagore)

RESPONSIVE READING

MINISTER: Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual.
 Yet there is a depth in those brief moments, which con-
 strains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other
 experiences.

CONGREGATION: We are a stream whose source is hidden.
 Always our being is descending into us from we know not
 whence.

MINISTER: I am constrained every moment to acknowledge
 a higher origin for events than the will I call mine.

CONGREGATION: Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.

MINISTER: This deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the subject and the object, are one.

CONGREGATION: From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all.

MINISTER: When it breaks through the intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through the will, it is virtue; when it flows through the affections, it is love.

CONGREGATION: Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable. The soul's health consists in the fullness of its reception.

MINISTER: This energy does not descend into individual life on any other condition than entire possession. It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whosoever will put off what is foreign and proud; it comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur.

CONGREGATION: The simplest person who is integrity worships God, becomes God; yet forever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable.

MINISTER: As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so is there no bar or wall in the soul, where we, the effect, cease, and God, the cause, begins.

CONGREGATION: Let us learn the revelation of all nature and all thought: that the Highest dwells within us; that the sources of nature are in our own minds.

(Ralph Waldo Emerson, statements from his essay, "The Over-Soul.")

SERMON:

“Where shall I go from Thy Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from Thy presence?
If I go up into Heaven, thou art there;
If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.
If I take the wings of the morning
And dwell in the furthest parts of the sea;
Even there shall Thy hand shall lead me,
And thy right hand shall hold me.”

Let us venture out on a spiritual journey this morning. A journey in search of God. A journey into Hell and Heaven – into the mountains and across the sea. But first, let us begin where we are – for that is where we always begin and end our journeys. Where we are.

Let us begin in a city like Grand Rapids, Michigan, but just a little smaller – Boise, Idaho, where I grew up. Let us begin in the heart of winter. Let us begin in the snow.

Etched in my soul, and by far the most haunting memory of my childhood, is a fantasy of death. I can't remember how often I succumbed to its allures, but I recall both what triggered it (always a brutal argument with my mother) and the time of day when these battles took place (right before bed). In each instance, a lie precipitated our melee. When my mother caught me lying, I (not content to leave bad enough alone) would confabulate a string of new lies designed to help me weasel free from the first one. What finally piqued her anger into fury, whether my transparent mendacity or my panic-driven tears, I'm not certain. Given the premium placed on happiness in our household, probably the latter. In either case, possessed by my favored demon (naked fear), I spun out of control, my mother's anger intensifying until it reached a fevered pitch. Invariably, the battle ended with me in total humiliation and banished to my room.

More vivid in memory than the struggle itself is its aftermath. After sobbing uncontrollably for a few minutes, I would launch my mind into a sea of self-pity. Into this wine-red sea sailed my fantasy of death.

Running away from home, I crawl out of my bedroom window into the snowy night. Wearing only my pajamas, I wander through the bitter cold into the woods between our house and my elementary school. I fall into a snowdrift. Never have I felt so all alone. And then I die. The snow stops and morning dawns. A schoolmate finds me lifeless in the snow, bursts into tears and rushes off to tell my parents. "Come quickly, Forrest is dead." My parents hadn't missed me. They didn't even notice I had run away. Hastening to my side and falling to their knees to embrace my body, they beg me to awaken. My father becomes distant. My mother moans in disbelief. Through tears of self-recrimination and overcome by grief, she pities me with all her heart.

At this moment in my imagined melodrama, the floodgate opens once again, my self-pity magnified by the specter of me dead, my mother's lamentations almost too poignant to bear. But not quite, for with this I rewind my fantasy of death and play it back again, retouching each reprise with embellishments to augment its pathos: ripped pajamas; my beloved sock monkey frozen to my breast; my little naked arms; my mother's perfect hair blowing wild in the wind; the dark sun; the snow on my forehead.

And then, interrupting my fantasy, the bedroom door opens. A crack of light pierces the darkness, and in slips my mother. Sitting down on the bed, she leans over and hugs me. She says she's sorry, confessing how very much she loves me. We cry together. She cradles me in her arms, my sobbing subsides, and inexpressible calm settles over me. I shut my eyes. My mother rocks me gently until I drift off to sleep. When I awaken in the morning, my fantasy of death is but a distant dream.

When you think about it, this childhood fantasy of mine reflects the basic elements of our most familiar archetypal tale

of sin and redemption. First, I abandon love in search for love; flee home to find the comforts of home; destroy myself in order to be saved. Then, through no act of my own, I receive love, find home and experience salvation. I receive my heart's desire not by virtue of my willfulness or self-pity (which in fact prove dysfunctional). Salvation instead comes to me uncoerced and undeserved, like grace. All I contribute to my own redemption is to long for it and to be willing to receive it when it comes.

Let me tell you a story I learned from Catholic theologian John S. Dunne. It is the parable of the mountain.

One day a group of seekers begins to climb a mountain in search of God. Having been told that God – or something very like God – lives at the top of this mountain, they decide to jettison their daily cares and thereby free their lives of petty entanglements. They winnow out every distraction that hitherto had diverted their contemplation. Seeking sacred ground, they leave their homes behind and climb into the clouds on a quest for perfect wisdom. In short, they follow the signs that point to God: transcendent, all-knowing, all-powerful.

Finally, they get to the mountaintop. From the tip of the mountain's crest, they can see farther than they have ever seen before. And the air is thin at the top of the mountain. This promotes abstract and disembodied reflection on the eternal verities, the very things that are confounded and veiled by the grossness, busyness, and squalor of the all-too-human life below. There is only one problem. God is not there. It seems that while they were climbing up the mountain in search of God, God was climbing down the mountain into the valley. How could this be? Perhaps because God seeks us as eagerly as we seek God. As pilgrims dream to escape their human lot, desiring transfiguration into something immortal and divine, God may desire to embrace humanity, to become incarnate in mortal flesh and thus escape the everlasting emptiness of eternity.

Play with it in your mind. We go up as God comes down. Each to the other is like a vanishing pot of gold at two ends of

a rainbow. The mystery is that by reaching for God, for a divine hand that turns out not to be there, we may in fact be changed, even saved. And in seeking us out, who knows? Perhaps God too is changed. Humbled. Spun into webs of passion and stung with pain. Brought to life.

The idea that God lives on a mountain is a mythic idea. It dates back to the ancient Greeks and beyond. One can easily understand why. If you were God, surely you would want a lofty perch with an expansive view. Particularly if it were relatively inaccessible. After all, part of your power has to do with the awe in which we mortals hold you. The problem with mountaintops, especially when one is immortal and therefore fated to live forever high above the clouds, is that every now and then one gets terribly, terribly lonely. It is then, perhaps, that one disguises oneself as a swan, a bull, or a Holy Ghost, descends into the valley below, and fathers a child.

Such stories are mythic in nature but a like intersection of human and divine is manifest in parables, as with Jesus' parables of the Kingdom. Jesus invites us to look again at commonplace things, beckoning us to view them not as they appear, but as signs of something deeper, more essential and abiding. "The Kingdom of God in a mustard seed." The divine is manifest within the ordinary. Such "cleansing of the doors of perception," to borrow the poet William Blake's phrase, permits one:

"To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour."

Though mystical in nature, this is not otherworldly thinking. On the contrary, Jesus' parables (and the reflections they inspire, such as those of William Blake) invite us to ponder the world with new eyes, to see the "super" in the "natural." They insinuate into our workaday lives barbed and haunting questions, questions that throw all we take for granted into a kind of divine abeyance, challenging us to awaken from our me-

chanical daze and consider ultimate things. Not unlike the story of his birth or the story of his march to death, Jesus' parables constitute a frontal assault upon the dogma of the apparent. They remind us where heaven really is.

When asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom was coming, Jesus himself says, "The Kingdom is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you." And in another version of this same saying, as recorded in the extra-canonical Gospel of Thomas, he tells his disciples, "What you expect has come, but you know it not."

We know not that it has come to our bedside and your table. It has come here to this place at this hour, even now. It is so near that we almost always miss it. But we don't give up. Once again we cast our eyes over the horizon, over the rainbow, across the sea of the heavens in search of God.

I grew up in the mountains of Idaho, but the sea has always captured my imagination more than even the mightiest peaks. Not only in contemplating thoughts of eternity, but in pondering the hidden depths and mysteries beneath the surface, for whenever I look out over the ocean, if I am paying attention, I experience humility and awe: humility in reflecting on how tiny we are in the whole scope of things; awe – wonder tinged at times with a hint of terror – at the unfathomable depths and unsearchable breadth of creation. As I gaze over the waters toward the horizon, with the poet Richard Wilbur, I am filled with a conviction that "Outside the open window / The morning air is all awash with angels."

Again, the question is not where to look for God but how. How, when we look out over the sea and upon the sun, to see "an Innumerable company of the heavenly host crying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.'" When it comes to miracles, far more persuasive than the stopping of the sun or the parting of the seas are the sun and the sea themselves.

So, if you miss God's presence here, go ahead. View your life's horizon. Peer into the vastness of the cosmos. And then

take out your own little compass. For we are navigators. We are pilots sailing our own fragile yet wondrous vessels across the heavenly waters, mortal explorers launched, by no choice of our own, on a brief and precious voyage.

You can't see the angel hovering over the face of the waters? Look again. Look farther. Look within. Look deeper and more closely. Francis Bacon, in The Advancement of Learning, wrote that: "They are all discoverers that think there is no land, when they can see nothing but sea." We too are ill discoverers that return from our adventures in the seen world without a profound sense of humility and awe in face of the unseen, of the vastness encompassing our navigations.

So take out your compass. Fix your bearings on the horizon. And then gaze out beyond the horizon, beyond the snow and the mountains, beyond the sea of the heavens into the fathomless depth of your own heart. Look a little more closely at things nearer to hand, your loved ones, dreams, hopes for a better tomorrow. You may still see only ocean, not the landfall, but your tiny vessel will sail more surely. You will embark anew on life's greatest quest with wind in your sails, and, in your heart, a joy for the journey. And, who knows? If your mind remains open and your heart expectant, for some brief and shining hour, you may even experience here and now the angel and the deep blue sea as one.

"If I take the wings of the morning
And dwell in the aftermost part of the sea,
Even there shall thy hand lead me
And thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, surely the darkness shall overwhelm me
And the light about me shall be night
Even the darkness hideth not from thee
But the night shineth as the day."

Amen. My love to you. God bless us all.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by our guest minister, the Reverend Dr. Forrest Church from All Soul's Church (Unitarian) of Manhattan, New York on January 28, 2001. The spoken sermon, available on both audio and video cassette at the church, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version. Audio cassette tapes of his Saturday lecture, titled "Lifecraft: The Art of Meaning in the Everyday," and his Sunday Forum discussion, titled "God 101," are also available from the church by calling (616)-459-8386 or on our website at www.fountainstreet.org.)