

See, the Lord God Comes

Isaiah 40: 1-11; 2 Peter 3: 8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Proverbs 25, verse 2 says "it is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out." Ecclesiastes 3: 11 says of God "He has made everything suitable for its time, moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."

These thoughts from the wisdom tradition of the Bible reflect on the limitations of human wisdom, and assert that those limits are set by God. Proverbs says that God conceals things, and the quote from Ecclesiastes tells us that God provides the human mind with learning and imagination but that capacities given to the human mind remain inadequate to fathom the purposes of the Almighty.

There is, in the religion of the Bible, and indeed perhaps in the nature of religion itself, an instinct that dealings with the realm of the divine always involve elements which are hidden, which are not merely invisible or beyond comprehension, but deliberately veiled from mortal view. There is a tie between the secret and the sacred.

Here are some instances of the motif of secrecy. In the early books of the Bible God offers a non-answer answer when asked his name-- "I will be who I will be" or "I am who I am." The angel who wrestles with Jacob won't give a name. It is established that no human being can look upon God and live, and when Moses, as the lone exception, is indulged with a view, God appears turned away from Moses' gaze. The place of worship from the beginning contains a Holy of Holies, an inner chamber accessible only to designated priests at ritually-established times. The box in which the Ten Commandments were carried serves God as a throne, but the throne itself is kept apart and out of sight, as removed from human perception as the invisible deity whose throne it is.

Those elements of human nature, both in terms of body and behaviors, which due to taboo or decency are kept private, have a corresponding religious significance in the Old Testament. They figure in rituals of cleanness or uncleanness, and have to do with one's permission to enter those outer courts of the place of worship which are the closest most Jews ever get to their hidden God.

This element of secrecy and hiddenness remains in religion in many ways. Even in a Baptist church the ceremonial elements of worship typically are stored in some special place and handled by designated preparers. Things regarded as marks of respect, like not placing anything atop a Bible, or lowering one's voice while in a private conversation in a sanctuary, are related to a sense of the near presence of an invisible but attentive holiness. Those persons who rarely come to church like to say that they half expect the ceiling to fall upon them when they enter the place of worship, and that itself is an acknowledgment of

how the sacred space is distinct from any other room. The unseen but presumed presence of God informs their apprehension, as in that line from the old Simon and Garfunkel song which says, "Blessed is the church service, makes me nervous."

That feature of Old Testament faith, its association of the secret and the sacred, was offset by another element. While priests were trained, ordained and equipped to handle mysteries on behalf of the people, prophets arose to make the mind of God clear and straightforward. God's judgment against King Ahab for his deceitful destruction of Naboth, in order to seize his property, was revealed by the prophet Elijah. King David's concealing his adultery by adding murder was exposed by the prophet Nathan. Jeremiah denounced the back room politics of his day, both in the palace and in the Temple. If priests accommodated religion to interacting with a God of concealment, prophets became the spokespersons for God as revealer of self.

Priesthood, as a position of power embedded in hiddenness, always is a temptation to corruption. The priest may consciously or unconsciously arrogate to himself God's privilege of remaining obscured to ordinary inquiry, and use the various kinds of veils involved in religious life not for God's purposes but to serve his own. The great impulse to Reformation in the sixteenth century, which ended Roman Catholicism's monopoly on Christianity in the West, arose from suspicion that the faith's priestly guardians were overreaching their positions of trust to enrich themselves at the price of distorting Christianity. The Protestant movement which resulted has inherited a suspicion of those parts of religion which naturally mystify, and emphasized what any and every believer can learn and do for himself and herself.

This sermon has a Protestant bias. I am taking this morning's gospel lesson as typical of the New Testament's shift away from understanding God in terms of secrecy to divining God in Christ, and experiencing God through the Holy Spirit. The clarity with which God is to be revealed in Jesus is expressed through the words of the prophet Isaiah. "Every hill shall be brought low and every valley lifted up" to make a way for the Lord's arriving. What is the point of that? to make it easier for the Lord to come? not at all! No, the low spots are to be brought up level and the high spots down to the level so that no matter where a human being is, the coming of God will be visible. There won't be obstacles to seeing what God is doing: "all flesh shall see it together."

The gospel of Mark begins with John the Baptist in the role of prophetic revealer of what God is about, and what God is about is Jesus Christ. Jesus, no matter how many mysteries adhere to him by dint of his divinity, is God being made manifest-- as Paul says in Colossians 1: 15: "the image of the invisible God." The gospels don't just proclaim Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy, but assert the supremacy of that variety of religion which has to do with what is comprehensible, what is revealed, God's desire to be encountered, understood, intimately known.

Mystery remains. Second Peter acknowledges that God's ways mystify us, and

God's timing is inscrutable. But it is confident that we know enough to do our best to become the persons God wants us to be. God's coming in Christ has not made everything as clear as we might desire; as the apostle says, "now in a mirror dimly, but then face to face." God has, however, invited our understanding in many ways, including in the communion ritual we'll celebrate this morning. Our Baptist forebears recast and reasoned out communion in their best effort to divest it of hocus pocus, and what remains is this table of the Lord, which commemorates the deeds of a Saviour sent by God, the expectation of whose coming we celebrate together in this season of Advent. Taking part in it is a way to comprehend without reasoning the meaning of having a Savior, and belonging to and being his body.

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