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Psalm 27
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Man Is The Problem

"Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your
heart take courage; yea, wait for the Lord."
Psalm 27:14

"God is not dead, nor does he sleep;
The wrong shall fail, and right prevail . . ."

So wrote Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, perhaps in answer to his contemporary
of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche, who had anticipated some of our modern
pseudo-theologians in insisting that God was dead.

I can assure you that God is very much alive--I spoke with him earlier this
morning as I am confident many of you did. I did not speak to him, I spoke with him.
He has spoken to me and to millions of others, not once, but innumerable times, as
he spoke with my friend Bishop Cushman:

I have heard it in the mountains,
I have heard it by the sea,
Where the plains are vast, and vaster
I have heard it calling, calling,
Ever calling unto me!

In the nighttime I have heard it
Through the darkness and the gloom,
In the morning when the sunrise
Bursts in splendor through my room

Oh, what is it that is calling
In the mountains, by the sea,
In the nighttime, in the daytime,
Ever calling unto me?

Oh, my soul, and can it be
It is God, and He is calling,
Ever calling, calling, calling,
Ever calling unto me?

Yes, it could be God, and it is God!

If God is not
How stirs my soul to see
The springtime glory of a common tree;
Or why stand hushed before the mountain's majesty?

If God is not
How stirs my soul to hear
The woodbird's sonnet lone and clear;
Or why so sweet the meadow music on my ear?

If God is not
How stirs my soul to feel
An unseen Presence near and real,
When to my hilltop evening shadows steal?

II

Now granted, much of this is sentiment, emotion, a psychological feeling state if you will. But most of you know me well enough to know that I also demand logic, and reason, and understanding as the foundation of faith.

Does not your logic and reason insist that the very words "God is dead" are self-contradictory? By definition God is that which cannot die, that which is eternal. It is much more commendable to be an honest atheist insisting that God has never existed than to be a sly deceiver insisting on that which is so obviously self-refuting. These deceivers have borrowed from George Orwell's 1984, and are like Big Brother who tries to convince us that evil is good, a lie is the truth, black is white, and wrong is right.

I would suggest this morning what I think has gone wrong with many of our ecclesiastical leaders. But one must first distinguish between ecclesiastical leaders and religious leaders. Many ecclesiastical leaders fail to be religious leaders. They are leading the churches along certain paths in which they are convinced the churches ought to go, but they are not doing what religious leaders are charged with doing--leading individual men and women closer to God. I would defy anyone to produce a single person who has come to know God better through a pursuit of the "God is dead" philosophy. Yet, is this not precisely the task of religion and of religious leaders--to help men find union with God?

Any professor in a theological seminary who was convinced that God was dead, if he were honest, would immediately resign his position and seek one on a university faculty in the sociology department. He certainly doesn't belong in a seminary or in the religion department of a university.

The modern ecclesiastical leader is often a man who has become discouraged and disheartened over the condition of the world. As a clergyman he once gave himself to the task of developing men and women of moral character who would go out into the world to mold it after the New Testament concept of the Kingdom of God. But that process takes so long, is so laborious and disheartening, that now this same man deserts his task as a shepherd of souls and becomes an architect of the new society, a sociologist seeking with any means available to mold the world closer to his heart's desire.

It is the subtle temptation of power which always tends to corrupt. We become so certain that God wants a different and a better world that in our eyes the end begins to justify the means, whatever the means.

III

Well, there are several things wrong with this position. First it rests upon our pride and vanity. We assume that our concept of the Kingdom of God or the utopian society is identical with God's.

I have seen this happen so often. How many people have I talked with who have been unhappy in marriage, unhappy in their occupation or profession, unhappy in their academic life, and who have immediately assumed that something was drastically wrong with it all because God surely would not want them to be anything less than completely happy.

Well, much depends on what we mean by the word "happy". By happy, a great many people mean that situation in which they have everything they want, everything is going their way, and nothing ever frustrates them. If that is happiness, then God never meant us to be happy. If he had meant us to possess that kind of happiness, he would have put us into a completely different kind of world.

Some of our theologians, if one may call them that, (theology is the study of God and how one can study a God one does not believe exists is beyond my understanding) some of our philosophers, rather, have this misconception about happiness. Things aren't going in our world the way they think things should go. Not many of us would argue with that. But then they decide that the reason for this confusion and evil is that God has died. May I suggest that the problem does not lie in God, but in man.

Man is the problem. God has created him, God has given him untold gifts, talents, abilities, resources. He would solve most of the problems confronting the world, if he could first solve the problem confronting himself--his own selfishness, vanity and pride. Man is the problem, not God.

To be sure, God is dead so far as his influence in some lives is concerned, but how much better it would be to say that many, many men and women are dead to God, unconscious of God, indifferent to God. For all the conscious effect he has upon their lives, he might as well be dead.

IV

Did you happen to read that "Time Line of History", which we published in the Congregationalist a few weeks ago? I hope you did, for strangely enough it was one of the most optimistic things I have read in a long time. If the whole history of this planet on which we live were to be represented by one year's time, twelve months, the history of modern civilization would be represented by the last five seconds of that year. This, you see, vividly points out something about man's problem today. He is impatient, he is in a hurry, he wants everything to arrive at perfection in his life time. It cannot be done; it will not be done. We are here as workers with God to make a contribution, to move this world, this civilization, this humanity of which we are a part, in some infinitesimal way perhaps, closer to God's ideal.

Oh, I know how you feel about the world in which you live. I too get pessimistic, discouraged, disillusioned. The problems seem vast and complicated, beyond any hope of solution unless-unless you are absolutely confident that this is God's world, that you don't have to do it all by yourself. In my own times of discouragement, I turn to those words which are the text of the sermon this morning and they give me new heart, and new faith and new courage:

"Wait for the Lord, be strong and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the Lord."

The trouble with some of our modern theologians, philosophers, and ecclesiastical leaders is that they don't want to wait for the Lord, and if you try to tackle the problems of the world without Him, you will indeed discover that you are alone, terribly alone.

Now perhaps at this moment I may sound a bit fatalistic to some. But I am not suggesting that we ought to sit back and wait for God miraculously to change the world into the kind of place we would like it to be. You and I have a part to play. We are co-creators with God.

I talked the other day with a very sensitive woman who deeply feels the conflicts and needs which exist in today's world. She wants to do something about it. She wants to change it all. And so do I. But I am convinced that being is more important than doing. What I am, as a person, is more important than what I do as part of some organized movement. Until I am what God wants me to be, he will never be able to use me as an effective instrument of his will.

I am a part of this world and therefore a part of the problem which confronts this world. I must first change myself, become a better, nobler person. Then perhaps God may someday be able to work in and through me in some small way to make this a better, finer world. In the meantime I'm not going to complain that God is dead, or indifferent, or that he created the wrong kind of world. I'm going to thank him and praise him for having given me this wonderful, glorious experience of life.