

October 16, 1966
Mark 8:22-26; Hebrews 11:1-6
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AND NOW I SEE

"And he looked up, and said, 'I see men as trees walking'"
Mark 8:24

A number of years ago I came across a quotation from an old book which had been written by a man named Stalker. I do not know who Mr. Stalker was, but I assume he was a clergyman, for he wrote some beautiful lines about the ministry as a calling.

Speaking of the minister's task of preaching, he pointed out in the quotation which I have before me what a congregation is really saying to its minister:

"Look, brother, we are busy with our daily toils and confused with domestic and worldly cares . . . but we eagerly long for peace and light to cheer and illuminate our lives; and we have heard that there is a place where these are to be found . . . But we cannot go there ourselves, we are too embroiled in daily cares; come, we shall elect you, and set you free from our toils, and you shall go thither for us, and week by week trade with that land and bring us its treasures and its spoils."

The author then charged the preacher with a solemn responsibility in these words:

"Woe to him if he does not week by week return laden, and even more richly laden, and saying, 'Yes, brothers, I have been to that land; and it is a land of peace and nobleness; but I have never forgotten you and your needs and the dear bonds of brotherhood; and look, I have brought back this, and this, and this; take to gladden and purify your life.'"

This, no doubt, is a somewhat idealistic concept of the Christian ministry. It does nevertheless enshrine a fundamental truth and delineate something of the true roll of a priest and a prophet of God,

As your minister, charged with this holy task, I must confess, as I am sure every sincere clergyman will confess, that I am very inadequate for such a responsibility. I, like yourselves, am too much involved in this world. The modern church is not what the church of 100 years ago was. The minister's vocation is changed, and today he is called upon to be far more than a preacher, as that vocation is described by Stalker. Today's minister must also be a promoter, an executive, an educator, and an amateur psychiatrist.

I for one, however, conceive the minister's task to be primarily what Stalker insisted it was--to mediate the divine grace to spiritually hungry men and women. This is central; all else is secondary.

To that end I want to share with you this morning a treasure I rediscovered as this week I made that journey to the land where peace and light are to be found. It is not a physical place, as I am sure you well understand, but one's physical environment can be of great assistance as one seeks to enter into a spiritual reality.

Last Monday, on my day off, and all alone, and one must occasionally be all alone, I went out into the country where I spent much of the day admiring and enjoying the gorgeous beauty of autumn. I likewise, however, spent much of the day seeking to feel myself in the presence of God. The result was one of the richest experiences I have had for a long time. I was able to identify myself with all of nature, to feel that I was one with God, and that God was everywhere and in everything. It was the kind of experience we would all like to have all of the time, but which comes to us only in very rare moments. It was no doubt what earlier Christians referred to when they spoke of the conversion experience, for these experiences do change one. It was indeed like a blind man suddenly being able to see, and one said to himself, "Why haven't I always felt like this, known this experience, seen this reality? I have been blind, but now I see."

Unfortunately, one comes back. The mists settle again. The confusions of the world once more take one into their grip and one falls back. Yet one remembers that vision, that understanding that suddenly came and one is a little bit better, a little wiser, a little closer to God than he was before.

II

God is! God can be known and experienced. This is the goal, the objective, of every human life. Those all too few experiences when I have felt myself in the very presence of Ultimate Reality have convinced me of that. That is the message I bring back to you on this Sabbath day. God is real, you can know Him. With faith and perseverance and discipline, you, whoever you may be, can know Him as the one great reality in the universe. To make this discovery is the object of human life.

There are so many men and women who speak of God as being dead, others who ignore God as if He were dead. There are those for whom material things have become God. Others talk about some kind of utopian society, the great society, the Kingdom of God on earth. But what is their idea--abundance of everything. Without God, life will forever be empty. In Him alone is there true joy and freedom.

U Thant, secretary-general of the United Nations, finally told the nations of the world this week what they have needed to hear for so long--the solution to our national and international problems must be found in the teachings of the great religions. It can be found nowhere else. These are God's truths, no pseudo-truths will suffice.

Swami Vivekananda of the Vedanta faith, once made this observation:

"Christ said, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.'
If all religions die out, if only this one truth lives, there will still be religion."

I have had some sad experiences in my life attending church conferences in which it often has appeared that certain church leaders, both lay and ministerial, were Congregationalists, or Methodists, or what-have-you, first, and Christians second. We Congregationalists uphold a great heritage, and it is an important one, but the only thing that ultimately matters is how real God is to us.

You don't have to adhere to any one denomination. You don't have to have one particular theology. You don't even have to have one particular idea of God. You just need to pray, "God, are you real, are you true?", and hunger and thirst

for an answer to that. You have taken the first step, and there is an old Hindu saying: "If you move one step towards God, he moves a hundred steps toward you."

This is what I have learned, or re-learned this week, as I took that journey which you as a congregation bid me take every week. God is real; you can know Him. It is the most important business of your life.

III

When Jesus had brought sight to the blind man, the man at first replied, "I see men as trees walking." There are so many people who get only a dim and clouded view of reality. Perhaps that may be the primary difficulty with the world in which we live today. It's not that they are blind and cannot see, it is that they only see partially. Somehow or other they are aware that there is or must be some reality that makes sense of the world in which we live, but they have never seen it clearly, never quite grasped its significance. There are some of us who can see only our own little selfish world in which we live and move and have our being. There are some who can only see the material world, the world of things which can be manipulated and used. There are some who can see nothing more to life than its sadness, and sorrows, and frustrations. They feel that life is indeed nothing but a "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Jesus was not satisfied with a man who could only half see things as they are. He laid his hands on the man's eyes a second time in order that he might see clearly, in order that he might see the world as Jesus saw it.

How do you see it? Thomas Traherne tells us how we ought to see the world:

"Your enjoyment of the world is never right till every morning you awake in heaven; see yourself in your father's palace; and look upon the skies, the earth and the air as celestial joys; having such a reverent esteem of all, as if you were among the angels . . . Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and kings in scepters, you never enjoy the world. Till your spirit filleth the whole world, and the stars are your jewels; till you are as familiar with the ways of God in all ages as with your walk and table; till you love men so as to desire their happiness with a thirst equal to the zeal of your own; till you delight in God for being good to all; you never enjoy the world."

None of us ever comes to see the world aright until we see that God alone is real, God alone is true, God alone exists everywhere.