

"ON BEING SENSITIVE TO THE 'AH' OF THINGS"

TEXT: "Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said,
'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did
not know it!'"

Genesis 28: 16

INTRODUCTION I share with you some words of a Zen master that I came across recently in my efforts to broaden what little understanding I have of Zen Buddhism. These are his words,

"Have you noticed how clean and glistening the cobble stones in the street are after the rain? And the flowers? There is no word to describe them. One can only exclaim 'Ah' in admiration. You must learn to understand the 'Ah' of things".

DEVELOPMENT I have the feeling at times that you and I live in an age more accurately characterized by "blah" than "ah". Both exclamations are phonetically close, but that is their only similarity.

Our television sets have progressed from black and white to living color, but our lives have regressed from living color to black and white. More and more we seem to deal with faceless corporations. We spend more hours each year filling out those difficult and devilishly inquisitive forms. Our eyes strain to read the digits by which the computers know us. And just as plastics seem to have triumphed over wood, so artificiality has taken the measure of genuineness in human affairs.

In the interest of efficiency, Post Offices no longer mark a letter by its place of origin; it's as though our mail comes from zones rather than from people. And at times it seems that romance has all but disappeared from the telephone. Not too many years ago in this city exchanges like Rhinelander, Tompkins Square, Murray Hill, Algonquin, Wadsworth, Gramercy and University all lent their charm to human contacts. Now-a-days seven numbers are all that one needs to know.

Add to this the stress that is placed on production in our society. The need to succeed, to achieve, to amass, to store up and display - all have a way of disqualifying us for reflection and destroying the faculty of awe.

And add one more thing - the loss of the sense of the holy in our American religious experience. Sincerely motivated to render God contemporary, we have, I sometimes feel, managed by different forms of gimmickery to trivialize the holy, to reduce prayer to an exercise in contemporary slang, to make our worship either coldly rational or unintelligibly emotional.

I heard it said in seriousness recently that the rise of the charismatic movement in the Roman Catholic Church can be traced, at least in some measure, to the abandonment of the Latin mass. We live in an age that is more conducive to the "blah" than the "ah".

STORY OF JACOB Tear that picture from the pad now and on a fresh page begin to sketch another scene. This one goes back a number of centuries.

A young man is traveling alone on a long journey. He has recently left his home under less than happy circumstances. Largely on his mother's advice, he deceived his brother and gained the family birthright falsely. He heads for Haran -

there to stay with an uncle until his brother's hot temper cools a little.

Night falls and this young man whose name is Jacob commandeers a stone for a pillow and prepares to sleep. As he sinks into unconsciousness, he discovers himself present at an unutterable sight. He envisions a staircase linking earth to heaven, and on it angels descending and ascending. At the top of this long ladder or staircase stood the Lord!

Then a voice said:

"I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father, and the God of Issac. The land on which you lie I shall give to you and to your descendants, and by you shall all the families of the earth be blessed!"

The story of Jacob's life is interpreted for him. Those little episodes of "dirty tricks" are now gathered into the larger purposes of God. The "what" and the "how" of things are now enlightened by the "why" and the "who".

His destiny is announced: "I will give you and your followers this land". A presence is promised him: "Behold I am with you and will keep you wherever you go!"

Let's face it. That's not bad for one night's sleep!

And then Jacob, awaking from this sleep, said, "Ah....ah....surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it". He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place. This is none other than the House of God. This is the gate of heaven".

And he called the name of that place "Bethel" which means "House of God".

DON'T SAY IT Now don't say it. Please don't say it. One should never say, "But this can't happen to me!" It can happen. It is God's nature to come - to gently invade our lives....to speak....to illumine....to bring us some new insight....to set our feet on the high road. Sometimes in a flaming bush (as He came to Moses), sometimes in a still small voice (as He came to Elijah), sometimes in an earthquake, a wind or a fire. Sometimes - in a church on a busy street in a great city, or out there on an open road, or under a starry sky, or as the dawn is breaking or the sun is setting. This time in a subway, next time on a bus, or at a lunch break in a crowded restaurant. It can happen.

Ecstasy. Marghanita Laski has made an interesting study of ecstasy. She suggests in some lines from a book by Wayne Oates on The Psychology of Religion that ecstasy can be triggered by such things as natural scenery, such as fine weather, being near the sea and so on; sexual love, involving the total person; childbirth, especially the sight of the first child; exercise and movement, such as swimming or flying; religion, such as being in vespers in a foreign cathedral; art, especially religious art; scientific knowledge, such as solving a difficult mathematical problem; poetic knowledge; creative works, such as suddenly being able to express something in permanent form; recollection and introspection, such as calling up vivid images from the past; beauty and the encounter of the beautiful.

Ecstasy. In other words, we are not required to create the "ah" occasions of life. They are already there. We simply have to learn to wonder as we wander and recognize them when they happen.

IN RELIGIOUS TERMS

Today is the first Sunday of February. Where did January go? In about three weeks we shall arrive at Ash Wednesday which signals the beginning of Lent - that forty day period which commemorates the time our Lord spent in the wilderness. You can fill those days with busyness or you can clear a little space in the wilderness of your own life and let the time of Lent truly prepare you for an "ah" experience of God's wonder. You can let the days of that soul time possess you - illumine you, your past, present and future. By why wait until Lent?

Here this morning in a few minutes we will gather about the Table of our Lord where God's presence is both pledged and concentrated. For some it will be a "blah" experience. For many it can be a time of waking to the "ah" of the bread and the wine. I ask you not to let the mechanics of communion distract you. Pay them no attention. Your ministers know the words. The ushers know their steps and way around the sanctuary. The organist knows his instrument and music. Give yourself not to such. Rather open yourself to the wonder of what is present here.

Sam Keen in his book Apology for Wonder writes,

"To wonder is to die to the self, to cease to impose categories, and to surrender the self to the object. Such a risk is taken only because there is the promise of the resurrection of meaning".

CLOSING

A number of years ago as a student I had the pleasure of visiting the city of Romsey in southern England, a community not far from Southampton, a port of embarkation for many travelers over the years. It was then with more than common interest that I looked over a book by Hugh Ross Williamson, an Anglican cleric, whose father had been a congregational minister in the city there for close to fifty years. Almost to the anniversary day of his father's installation in the Congregational Chapel, Williamson found himself preaching in the Abbey in the city of Romsey. Let him tell you how he felt:

"When the evening came and I walked slowly in procession from the sacristy, holding my father's sermon case, I was cold with fear. The whole weight of the Abbey's age was on me, its child - and its very familiarity was the most frightening thing of all.

The nave was crowded. It seemed that Romsey had decided to come to church -- but, once I was in the pulpit, all apprehension vanished. It was, after all, only a simple family affair. I put to one side the carefully prepared sermon and spoke as simply as I could. Almost as if I were explaining to my father why I was there.

Except, of course, that by now he would understand far better than I did how bread and wine had to be the Body and the Blood of God and why that was the central fact of all human history and of all life"

"Surely the Lord" said Jacob, "is in this place, and I knew it not!"

PRAYER Lead us, O Lord, ever more deeply into the mysteries of life and death as we see them revealed in the bread and wine of the Last Supper of thy Son, Jesus Christ.

May we see there plainly, clearly and simply stated, the meaning of our existence and of thy purpose for us and all thy people everywhere. May this meal open our eyes to the presence of Christ among us. Bind us more closely to each other and to Him and lift up our hearts and minds to thee, that we may depart from here renewed in body and soul - fed and nourished, and made new. Amen

Be with those members of our congregation who this coming week face surgery...apprehension and uncertainty.