

"WHAT HAVE I TO SAY NOW?"

Last sermon UCC church, Chappaqua, while there a resident.....Elliott #1497

Sisters and brothers, our readings this morning center in the stories whose word from God was understood to be life-formative for the Bible's three mountain-peak personalities: ABRAHAM (Gn.12.1-8), MOSES (Ex.3.1-17a), and JESUS (Mt.3.13-17). What they had to say to their generation and to the ages was in directest response to their hearing and hearkening to, obeying, the life-formative word of the God of power, truth, justice, and love. And what I have to say to you this morning, at this stage of my pilgrimage and on this occasion of our taking leave of this our beloved congregation of eighteen years, derives from Abraham, Moses, and Jesus and from my own confrontation, through 62 years of life and 40 years as an ordained minister, with this same God, this one and the same God, the God of heaven and earth, of root and sky.

This is a scary sermon. I don't know that it will scare you--you may not even get interested in it, to say nothing of being scared by it. But it's scary for me. Ordinarily I don't scare myself when I preach. I just feel moved, as a minister of the gospel of Jesus and as a human being, to enunciate some truth that has become luminous for me in relation to my perception of my hearers' needs, and I pronounce that truth as persuasively as the Spirit can manage, given my impedences by nature and history and my own perversities. So preaching in general does not frighten me, though it always awes me with its enormous potential effect-range from life-change to a little less than nothing. Nor do I find this sermon frightening because it is the last in our long residence in this town. I have known many partings--more than if I had been less feisty--and their sweet sadness conjoins always with earnest prayer for those we leave and eager anticipation of those we are to greet and become fellow-workers with toward the kingdom of God, the realm and reality of no partings and all meetings. No; rather, this sermon's title will clue you into the reason this is a scary sermon for me.

When the deacons through the minister asked me to preach today's sermon, my first inclination was to decline--for Loree and I feel that too much is being made of our departure from the seminary and from the town and from this congregation (almost as though everybody is anxious to get rid of us). We believe that no more should be made of our departure than is made of that of any other members--which raises the question whether we make enough of others' departure. Then I said to myself, "If I were to say yes, what would I have to say?" Not that I had any fear of not having something to say: I am never speechless except when beholding a strikingly beautiful woman. Then the challenge hit me: beyond the specific what-would-I-have-to-say-on-that-occasion, I was struck by the thought "What do I have to say now in my life's journey?" And that thought was, though scary, so exhilarating and intriguing that I had to say yes.

Now, you are not me, so you cannot share my fright over the idea in this sermon title. But I guarantee you can scare yourself, and profit from this sermon, if you address the question to yourself. Suppose you were standing in this pulpit this moment, telling us what you have to say now about life, your life, the world, your world, reality, human existence, God, hope? Well, what would it be? Right now, on your bulletin, jot down a few honest things, while I am silent. They you'll have them for meditation and prayer and planning when you go home. Complete this generic stem: "What I have to tell anybody and everybody, the world, now, is...."

(Five minutes of silence.)

Well, that's enough time to get started, anyway. According to Talmud, it should be enough time to finish; for you should be able to produce your life-message while standing on one leg.

[A marginal note on silence and on the reception for us after the worship: We designed our new house so that Loree has three places to escape from my noisiness --her secretary-nook, her loom room, and her loft. Here they are (holds up model of house, whose frame was completed yesterday). The model will be on a table at the reception, for your poking about while trying to decide whether to visit us on Cape Cod.]

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Well, here is what I have to say now:

First, I am daily overwhelmed, at this stage of my life, with the mystery of goodness. For example, in designing and contracting and building our dream house, every human being we have met has been in some way or ways a victor over the downward suction of evil in the heart and in the world. I believe in the devil, but how can I believe in the devil when the world is so radiantly full of decent and even good human beings with a sense of honor beyond ego and of caring beyond self-advantage? I see that I must now work harder than ever to retain my belief in the devil. The good in human beings, especially in those who disagree with me and are therefore wrong, increasingly catches my attention and impresses me and urges me to praise God, whose goodness shines through the whole creation (as poet Gerard Manly Hopkins has it, "The world is aflame with the glory of God"). And underneath my aging beard I smile at the force which a half century ago the reverse argument had against my faith in God: how can you believe in God when there is so much evil in the world? Brothers and sisters, if I am remembered for any bromide, it will be this: What gets your attention gets you, and what holds your attention is your god. What I am now testifying to is that what is increasingly getting my attention is the presence of the kingdom of God, the rule of God, the goodness of God, in the common life. I am not Polyanna about this --as though Murphy's Law in reverse, if anything can go right it will. But, in the familiar phrasing of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I see the bright powers winning more battles than the dark powers. And I remember the words of our Lord Jesus: "Look! I see Satan fallen from heaven!" And the balancing words, "The world lies in the Wicked One, the Prince of the Power of the Air." For I am no less aware than I ever was of the monstrous injustices and apparently meaningless anguish within human societies and from us to so much of the rest of the thin biosphere of our small planet.

The second thing I have to say now is both a life inference and, from the first thing, a case inference. It is this: I am responsible not for THE world but for MY world. Poet Edna St. Vincent Millay grasps this in her couplet, "The world moves on from side to side / No wider than the heart is wide"--and, I may add, no deeper. THE world presses upon us, but God calls us to be the lords and ladies of our attending--a power we alone among creation's sentient beings, possess, for all the others are ruled by the iron law of stimulus/response. THE world tries to stimulate the organism whose name is Willis Elliott, and I do not feel ungentle toward those whose livelihood depends on getting my attention. Though sometimes I feel that the media forms one vast sewer pumping shit all over me, I waste no energy being irritated by this; rather would I be irritated with myself if I permitted myself to be irritated by external stimuli. Often I have comforted apologetic mothers whose children cried during my sermon by saying, "Did your child cry?" The extent of my noticing is to raise my voice enough to be heard over disturbances. As a young preacher, I often preached in rural churches whose first pew was reserved for nursing mothers; and if I wasn't distracted by a beautiful naked breast--and I wasn't--how could I ever be distracted by a squalling brat? It is so also when I am in conversation, especially in the counseling situation: I say to myself, "Something is struggling to be born, and God has me here now as midwife; how can I help this birth?" Nothing about the person distracts me from this maieutic purpose. While I was preparing this sermon last night, a doctoral student of mine phoned me from Ohio, and I said with mock irritation, "What do you mean interrupting my sermon-preparation Saturday night?" Lightedfooted, he replied, "Oh, forgive me, I thought you prepare your sermons Sunday morning." Now in this matter I am making no claim to saintliness, the enrapturing beatific vision, prayer without ceasing, the practice of the Presence--all of which I believe in and am not very good at. Rather, some of us, and I am one of them, are naturally spaced out. Natural-born meditators, we have the gift of attention, the power of abstracting ourselves with slight effort from the surround, the external stimuli, "the situation," "what's happening." At the Chappaqua surprise party for Loree and me, a psychiatrist in his speech said "Willis is so interior a person, so far from the sensation type, that he should drive a car only in dire emergencies." Some of us, me included, have to struggle to know what the hell's going on out there; and

some are almost entirely unconscious of what's going on in here, in what the Bible calls "the heart." It's one of God's little games to throw these contrasting types together to see what happens (though I would think it irreverent to say "just for the hell of it")--in marriage, in the parent/child relationship, in church and community and at work and play. Which reminds me of a famous saying of Loree my wife: "When communication happens, it's a miracle."

The third thing I have to say now is a development from the second thing: Since I am responsible not for the world but for my world, how do I decide what IS my world, which is coterminous with my responsibility? Philosophically, I heighten my awareness of the tension between my powers and my limits. Andrew Wyeth's famous painting, "Christina's World," shows a Maine neighbor of his out in her field as far from the house as she can manage to drag herself by her arms, her legs being useless. The real woman, whom the painter admired, was at the limit of her life-radius; and we who meditate on the picture share his admiration for a soul bigger than its body --especially we whose work involves so many whose bodies are bigger than their souls. My world, here and now, is God's assignment to me--for myself and others, for the world--given, at my life-stage, particular powers and particular limits. To know who and where I am within these powers and limits is life-wisdom, the knowledge-base of the art of living.

A few days ago there came to me a college professor, sent by her secular psycho-counselor of the past three years. Thus she began: "My psychiatrist, who is moving to another area and so has cut me off, suggested that I go to you for one session--for my problem, according to her, is spiritual, and you are a spiritual counselor. But it seems silly to me, because I'm an atheist and I live in the real world." Said I, "If the world you are living in is real, why go for counseling at all? My world, defined by the Bible's way of seeing and living in the world, is unreal to you, and you even claim it's unreal in the absolute sense, 'myths' in the negative sense. I can further your exploration if you yield your dogma about the real." So great was her hunger that she was willing, which moved us onto how...not in the abstract sense how does she decide what is real (she's been all through the cults and philosophies), but how does she now decide what is real-for-her, her "world," her responsibility?

Well, I'll tell you how I decide. My witness here is quite concrete. I decide what is my world/responsibility as I live day by day struggling to be a human being in God's creation under illumination of Scripture, the Bible, which became my guide-book just a half century ago, when I was twelve years old in a secular culture in a worldly home. My age-twelve diary records the day, my twelfth birthday, when I began to read the Gospels a half hour a day, for spiritual formation by Jesus. In this subsequent half-century I have read and taught all the world's scriptures from over the centuries and around the globe, and for me the Gospels are still "it." Not that they are the world's greatest literature: they are not. The greatest books ever written are, in my opinion, Isaiah and Genesis, in that order. But the Gospels are "it" for me because they came into existence, and continue extant, to celebrate Jesus, the One who above and beyond all others centers my heart on God and my hope in God, and therefore centers my life, my story, and even history itself. The Gospels are "it" for me because Jesus is "it" for me. Christian formation--as Paul puts it, "to let Christ be formed in you"--is Gospels formation; it is meditating on and praying through the works and words of our Lord as the evangelists, the Gospels writers-redactors, understand the Spirit's meaning in the existence and death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, to be a Christian means to pay more attention to Jesus than to anyone else past or present. [Now that I'm on the Bible as my book of inner formation and of guidance on life's way, I should mention that in the Chappaqua Library this month, just on the left as you enter the main doors, you can see some fruits of my biblical interest through the years: a display of biblical artifacts--originals of all the coins mentioned in the Bible, a 47-centuries old statue of Pharaoh Osiris, ancient symbol of oppressor/deliverer, and some lamps of the biblical period, together with some biblical-archeology books in the Chappaqua Library.]

How do I decide what is my world? Three biblical characters, especially these

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three, offer my primary clues: Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. The rest of this sermon will say why they do.

In the case of each of these three, their "world" was given to them as they with humble bravery lived the truth they saw, not counting the cost. They model a change in the question How do I decide what is my world? The question becomes Will I accept or turn from reality, facticity, what I am convinced is truth-for-me? If I accept, "my world" is given me: I do not have to decide what it is. The fundamental set of soul here is truth-loyalty, the virtues of which are honesty and courage. Abraham, Moses, and Jesus are my primary personal symbols of the conviction that only by loyalty to truth-as-perceived-by-me can my life, our lives, have a center of clarity powerful enough to provide comprehensivity (leaving nothing out, not matter how painful) and coherence (leaving nothing dangling, no matter how absurd). As a sacramental of this fact, here is an oak peg, the only type of linkage for the posts and beams of our new house, whose frame has no metal. What these simple, rough pegs are to the house, truth is in heart and society and universe. (Well, therefore, is the devil called "the father of lies"!) Here the spirit of Abraham and Moses and Jesus is for me paradigmatically expressed by Thomas Aquinas, the "angelic teacher" of Western Christendom seven centuries ago: "The road that opens before our feet is a challenge to our hearts long before it tests the strength of our legs. We are called to walk to the edge of the world and beyond, off into the darkness--sure in spite of all our ignorance, secure in spite of all the dangers we shall have to confront, joyfully in love in spite of all the pressures on our hearts. In that darkness beyond the world we shall begin to know the world and ourselves. We shall come to know that we were not made to pace out our lives beyond prison walls, but to walk into the arms of God."

When Abraham was 75, God said to him "Go...." God is the God of PROMISE. I am only 62. How old are you? Abraham is the Bible's personal symbol of THE PILGRIMAGE OF FAITH....When Moses was 80, God said to him "Go....I-Am-the-One-Who-Was-and-Is-and-Will-Be with you and for you." God is the God of FULFILMENT. 80! I am only 62. How old are you? Moses is the Bible's personal symbol of SOCIAL-INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY....When Jesus was 30, God said "You are my son" (an announcement made, according to Mark, in our Lord's heart; but according to Matthew and Luke, to the crowd at Jesus' baptism: "This is my son"). Only 30! I am 62. How old are you? Jesus is the Bible's personal symbol of our identity in the God of LIFE IN LIFE AND BEYOND DEATH, the personal symbol of TRANSCENDENCE of troubles, even of death itself. And he is, for us Christians, even more: in the Spirit, he is the presence of the Kingdom before the arrival of the Kingdom; he is both its herald and its model; and he calls us to work with him now to make, of the wilderness we have made, a Garden again.

Yes, this sermon has been scary to prepare. But it has also been easy, for I have not had to struggle to decide what to say. What I have said is about what I would say any morning at 2 o'clock if you were to shake me awake or even half-awake. It is, in the quaint image of the Talmud, what I would say anytime anywhere while standing on one leg. And I have tried to say it this morning plainly, as it came to me last night--plainly, without literary pretense and polish. I have tried to say it as to those whose faces, in Loree's lovely expression, I desire to cherish. And I have tried to say it as one who is slowly becoming wiser and gentler about life--as in the hasidic story my friend Rabbi Stern of Chappaqua loves to tell: the wise one has two pockets; in one he keeps a card to humble himself; on it is written, "Behold, I am dust and ashes"; and in the other a card reminds him to be both joyful and responsible; it says "For me the world was made." Inside the cover of his latest book, which he put in our mailbox recently, Chaim Stern penned this: "For Loree and Willis--Gates open, close & re-open. The rhythm is toward opening, but both are needed."

So I say to you all, may our God, the God of comings in and goings out, bless you in the living of your days.