Sunday, June 9, 1963; June 17, 1973
GOD IN UNLIKELY AND SURPRISING PLACES (Communion Meditation)

Usually when we think of God and where we know him and discover His presence; we think of the likely places. We remember knowing God in life's lovely and inspiring experiences. We think of discovering God in his goodness to us. We think of being aware of God in connection with regular worship and within the church building. And we think of other likely places and events.

We do discover God's presence in these likely places. We are aware of God in life's lovely and beautiful experiences; we find God in our worship and song. Life's happy moments remind us of the goodness of God.

But this morning, as we prepare to celebrate Holy Communion, let's think more about being aware of God; about discovering his presence in some of the unlikely and surprising places. For this too has been the experience of many people. It can also be our experience and can therefore redeem many situations which on the surface may delude us. And being open to God I s presence in unlikely and surprising places can help us not to shut out God when we may need to be aware of him the most.

God in unlikely and surprising places! All through the Bible we read of the experience of men who discovered God when they did not expect it. Look at these few examples:

Remember Moses, who had fled from Egypt into the wilderness because in anger he had killed an Egyptian taskmaster. He was trying to hide from God and his people. Then one day as he was tending sheep, he discovered God's presence on the side of a mountain in the underbrush. He had not expected to meet God there.

Job discovered that God was present with him in all his suffering and loss.

Elijah, when hiding in a cave, discovered that God was there also. Elijah had grown afraid and, in his fear, had run away from his responsibility. It was while he was hiding; while he was afraid; at that time that he thought he was the only righteous and God-fearing man left in the country; it was at his darkest moment, in a mood of depression and despair; when he had almost given up; it was in such an unlikely and surprising place that Elijah rediscovered God. And it was all the more unlikely and surprising because first came the great and strong wind, then an earthquake and then a fire, but God was not in any one of these as Elijah had expected; but then came a still small voice — and Elijah found God. It cr1angedthe course of his life and of the life of his nation.

Come with me now to the New Testament. Where do we find God? In a most unlikely and surprising place. Born in a stable! Working in a carpenter's shop! A man named Jesus, teaching and healing! Where do we find God? Welcoming a prostitute! Forgiving and accepting the worst of sinners! Spending his time training a bunch of fishermen to carry on his work. If you had been searching for God, would you have looked in such places? People said — this couldn't be God — eating and consorting with such people, the outcasts!

And besides, this man Jesus came from Nazareth. Could God be in such an unlikely place and person? The people of the time said: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth

had never been remarkable for anything in the way of religion. It had never produced a great man, or a prophet, or a man of God. It is never even mentioned in the Old Testament at all. Would you expect God to reveal himself in such a place and person? God didn't come as a clergyman, as a priest of even a Pope.

And even more, think of finding God on a cross between two criminals. What an unlikely and surprising place! Who would've thought of looking there?

Where else do we find God? Jesus said at one point — "Where two or three or gathered together in my name, there I am also." God with two or three or more in a jail? Or in a demonstration for justice!

Who would've expected to find God in that first Pentecost, or in an upper room with those common, unheard-of persons?

Well, it's the testimony of the Bible and of the saints that we find God in some unlikely and surprising places; sometimes when we least expect to meet God.

Come now into our own time and world. Where are some of the unlikely and surprising places we might meet God?

I think of a woman who was a hopeless alcoholic for 15 years. In the depth of her suffering, she came to believe; to believe that there was a power greater than herself that could help her. In the wilderness, in life's darkest moments she discovered God.

Or I think of another man, an alcoholic, who when asked whether he actually believed that Jesus had changed water wine, replied: "Well, I don't know about that; but I know that he has changed beer into furniture in my home."

Harry Emerson Fosdick talks about his finding God in an unlikely place. In his young manhood, he had a critical nervous breakdown$ It was the most terrifying wilderness he ever traveled through. He dreadfully wanted to commit suicide but instead made some of the most vital discoveries of his life. His little book, THE MEANING OF PRAYER, would never have been written without that breakdown. He found God in a a desert, in life's darkest moment.

Why is it that some of life's most revealing insights come to us not from life's loveliness, but from life's difficulties? Or as a small boy asked: "Why are all the vitamins in spinach and not in ice cream?" I don't know! But I do know that we meet God in some of these unlikely and surprising places8 We can discover God in the hell and darkness of our personal lives.

Yes, we find God in some unlikely and surprising places. We find God in the darkness and hell of the world. He's there with those who suffer, and moan and cry out for justice. He's there in jail with the unwanted, the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the lonely, the weary.

Yes, we find God in some unlikely and surprising places! God is also here in this common, simple meal this morning. God is here as we gather around his table. Come now and rediscover God, and find God here, may we also go to serve in unlikely places and thus also find God there.