Sunday, September 10, 1978
WHEN GOD SEEMS FAR AWAY (NO. 1 IN A SERIES: SPIRITUAL PROBLEMS WE ALL FACE)
Luke 11:5-13

Much of our living is spent dealing with everyday affairs; with materials we can touch, see, feel, taste, and hear. Our lives are filled with routine and with tasks to be accomplished. We have to get up in the morning, eat our meals, do our work, take care of personal matters, meet deadlines, pay bills, get along with our family and our associates, deal with jealously, gossip, bad temper, illness, accidents, and meeting the new problems that crop up each day.

Living in this kind of world, it's easy to miss or forget that there is also an eternal dimension to life; that there's more to living in this world than we can touch, see, feel, taste and hear; that there's more to life than the here and now; more to life than getting all there is to get while the getting's good; more to life than promotions and higher sales and more money to spend.

All of us live in two worlds; the world of the here and now, of the immediate, the material; and the world of the spiritual, the eternal. One function of the church is to regularly and creatively remind us of the eternal dimension, the transcendent, that which we call God. The church is here to remind us that as human beings we are always part of a larger cosmic system and that God exists.

If one stops to think about it, life is hard to understand without God, without the eternal dimension. One person put it this way in a letter to TIME Magazine some time ago. "God is the keystone to an understanding of the universe and human beings. Take God out and the structure falls into a heap of meaningless pieces. The universe becomes a chance arrangement of atoms and hum.an beings become an accident, beasts, or machines. But put the keystone back in and the universe is seen as an orderly, fantastically complex system directed by infinite intelligence. Science and theology become parts of a unified field of knowledge and human existence becomes meaningful."

So, talk about the eternal dimension, talk about God, how-ever naive it sometimes seems to others looking in, is a way of talking about the largest, the most important thing, about everything that is.

During the next several weeks in this series of sermons, we will be dealing with this eternal dimension in life, with the spiritual side of life and with some of the problems we face.

This morning we face the question: "What do I do when God seems far away? When the eternal dimension is dim and silent? Someone will say," I feel that I've lost contact with God, "or" I prayed and prayed and yet there seems to be no answer. "" Doesn't God care? "I've felt this way, haven't you? Often when trouble comes and we are in despair, God seems far away.

In the Old Testament, there is the story of a man named Job. He was rich. He had a nice family. He was well known and liked by his neighbors. But suddenly it seemed as if the whole world came tumbling in upon him. He lost his wealth. His family fell apart. His sons died in a drunken brawl; his reputation withered; his wife cursed him and Job himself was stricken with a very serious and painful disease.

In the midst of his agony, we can hear Job's cry: "Oh that I knew where I might find God. I would lay my case before him. But everywhere I search, God is not there." The cry of Job is repeated over and over again. It is relived and heard a thousand times in every generation and land when God seems far away. Our faith comes to a low point.. we seek God and it is as if God withdraws. We call to God but all we seem to hear is the echo of our own voice.

Have you felt this way? There are occasions which come into the lives of each one of us when life itself does not seem to make much sense.

I know of a university student who had come to the end of his academic career. He had made a brilliant record, won every prize, earned, and carried away every honor. The following week there was waiting for him a promising job. The next morning, he was to be married to his childhood sweetheart. Then on his way to graduation, he was killed.

I knew a young couple who had hoped for many years for a child, and when the child was born it was hopelessly handicapped both mentally and physically. And there was another woman in a hospital who had had 13 operations and 39 blood transfusions. One day she said. "I do not like to complain, but sometimes things do not make sense."

We all know of similar experiences. Sometimes God seems far away. Not only does this happen when tragedy occurs, but in the normal routine of life, God the Eternal Dimension can seem absent. We get a vague feeling that there is no God, or if there is, God doesn't care.

The person who wrote the Psalms knew the feeling. We are all familiar with the 23rd Psalm which begins, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." But right before it, the 22nd Psalm begins, "My God, my· God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer; and by night, but find no rest."

What then can we say to this feeling of God being far away?

1, First, it is some help to know that even the most devout of the Christian saints have had their moods of depression; their times of doubt; their times when God seemed far away.

Sometimes, we make the mistake of looking at other people and thinking — "Oh I wish I could be like him or her. Her faith is so strong — she has no worries or problems — she has no doubts or feelings of despair." Don't fool yourself! Anyone who takes God seriously will feel down in the dumps at times. No one has the perfect faith. No one totally escapes moods of despair; times when God seems far away.

Read the biographies of renowned persons in all walks of life; persons in the church, in literature, in government, the giants of prayer — all seem to have one thing in common--they all confess that they have had deep moments of doubt--moments and days of despair; days and times when they felt that God was far away or that God didn't care.

Goethe, the eminent writer, as he contemplated at the age of 75, the heaped-up prizes that the world had showered upon him wrote — "My existence has been nothing but pain and burden, the perpetual rolling of a rock that must be raised up again forever."

When Leo Tolstoi, the famed Russian novelist was yet a young man, he became utterly disheartened, and decided to kill himself; Mark Twain when 30 years old, put a loaded pistol to

his head but lacked the courage to pull the trigger; William James who inspired many in his generation, in his dispirited youth almost committed suicide.

In his autobiography-, Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the most distinguished American preachers, tells how as a young man he came to the point of a complete breakdown; a point of utter despair and indeed God seemed far away.

The Old Testament tells the story of Israel. being carried away into exile and they said, “This is the end. The glory is departed. Our hopes are finished. There is nothing left but heartache, misery, and death. God has left us.”

Or remember how Jesus on the cross was taunted by those standing around — they said — “He trusted in God and look where it got him. He trusted that God would deliver him: Let God deliver him now if God delights in him. Let him come down from the cross.”

Later the Bible tells about two disciples on the road to Emmaus and how dejected they felt; how they confessed to the stranger who walked with them that they had trusted in Christ, but now their hope was gone.

Surely this is the ultimate disappointment, and no despair is as deep when God seems far away. So, when God seems far away to you; remember that the greatest of the Saints have felt this way, yet they are remembered as giants for God.

2. Secondly, it helps us to handle our despair if we do not run from it. It only makes it worse to gloss over the unpleasant facts and feelings. We do not answer a question by refusing to recognize it.

As we read the Bible, we discover that God is both self-revealing and self-concealing. Human beings search for God, but at times God seems far away. That is the eternal dilemma of our lives. Once Mary said to Jesus, “Why have you dealt thus with us.” There was an occasion when the disciples said to Jesus, as he was sleeping on a pillow in the stern of a little ship that seemed about to be capsized by the storm, “Master, do you not care that we are about to perish?” There was an hour when Jesus cried out with the Psalmist, “My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken me?” These feelings come. We cannot avoid them. Our life will never be completely free of them. It seems to be part of the rhythm of life.

Now this means also that if you want to be of help to someone who is feeling that God is far away; someone who is in the depths; someone who is facing temptation and despair; it does no good to simply and piously say — “You have to have faith!” It does no good to give any kind of easy answer. The best way to be of help is to listen and try to understand; to listen and try to experience what the other person is experiencing. The best help one can be is to just be there with the other person.

Time after time I have been with a person who had just lost a husband or wife or child. The person was all alone, sometimes with almost no relatives or very close friends. As we would sit and talk, the person would tell me how much in despair he or she felt, how alone, and how hard it was to face life.

All one can do then is listen, listen very carefully, and try to understand something of what the other person is going through. It helps just to know that someone is with you who cares.

And that's what the story of the coming of Jesus Christ is all about. The story says that God doesn't call to us from some far away heaven and say to us in our sorrow or despair or trouble — "have faith, pull yourself together." No! The story of Jesus Christ tells us that God is with us in all things. The eternal dimension is present in everyday life.

3. Knowing this then, what else is helpful when God seems far away. In the scripture lesson. this morning we read the parable which Jesus told to stress the importance of persistence in our prayers. This stress on persistence, on keeping at it, applies to all of our living.

Jesus said, "Suppose someone comes to your house in the middle of the night when you are sleeping and tries to arouse you to come and open the door so they can borrow some food. Inside the house you reply — " Do not bother me. I am trying to sleep. I don't want to get up and give you what you want. "But if the person keeps knocking, if the person is persistent, pretty soon you will get out of bed and give him what he wants.

Now we can imagine Jesus going on to say with a smile that if persistence is the clue to success here and elsewhere, surely it will help in our prayers and in our spiritual life. It has been said over and over again that the secret of the spiritual life is to keep at it. We find it easy enough to praise persistence as a value elsewhere in life but are reluctant to practice it in our religion.

Every athlete appreciates the need for persistence if he or she is to excel in that sport. A person has to practice and practice and practice. One has to keep at it even on those days when one doesn't feel like it. Some days a person is clumsy and cannot seem to do what is right. It's like those dry spells in the religious life. The best hitters in baseball have batting slumps. It doesn't help to give up — but rather one needs to be persistent. There's the secret.

So, it is in our spiritual lives — when God seems far away, part of the secret is to be true to our discipline; to be faithful in our practice of prayer; to keep going.

A friend of mine whose wife died suddenly told me as he was going through his period of darkness and despair; when he was at his lowest; he had two lights to guide him. The first was simply "duty," being faithful and persistent at his appointed rounds, doing his job. Even in his mood of despair, he kept remembering those who were depending on him; those to whom he had promised to be faithful. Even though much meaning was gone from his life during that period, it was his keeping faith to his duty, his persistence that finally helped bring him through.

The second light which helped was the flickering light of hope, a belief that God is in the process of working in and through our deepest moments of despair and tragedy; and that God will work some good out of it all. What is most difficult is the waiting. God's ways are not always our ways and God's pace not our pace.

But the Eternal Dimension is always present. God is alongside us even though God seems absent. When God seems far away it's something like the mist or clouds that sometimes keep a mountain top from our view. People can tell us that the mountain peak is still there, and it is, but we cannot see it. Then one day the clouds go away, and the top is visible again. Yet another day comes, and the peak is hidden from our view.

Since God is both beyond and transcends our everyday world as well as being present in it, this means that God's absence is never separated from God's presence, even though we may perceive it as separate. The intimacy with God in our earthly existence will always remain an

intimacy that transcends human intimacy and so we will experience God's intimacy as both presence and absence. The good news in all of this is that God will never leave us. Amen.