Sunday, December 18, 1983
HOPES AND FEARS
Luke 2:1-14

Of all the suggestions ever made to me about preaching, one of the most helpful ones was from a woman who said, “Too many sermons tell us what to do, but not very many tell us how to do it. What many of us need,” she said, “is something more practical and specific.”

I agree with this remark. We preachers do tend to dwell too much in the realm of the ideal and often do not give enough help in ways to live out our faith. The kinds of religious questions which people have are many, but one of the most fundamental questions of all, and one which is asked frequently, is: “I would very much like to experience God in a more personal way, but this has never happened to me. I do not know where or how to begin. Tell me how to do it.”

To begin, I believe that all people have deep within them a “God Hunger,” a longing to feel and know that they are connected to God, connected to the source and foundation of all being. St. Augustine wrote: “Thou, O God, has made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”

The answer to this built in “God hunger” is what Christmas is all about, and the story of Christmas gives us some clues as to how we can come into a more personal experience of God. In fact, there are two characteristics of the Christmas event which stand out in this regard.

1. The first thing to notice about Christmas is that God takes the initiative. What happened to Mary and Joseph and what happened in Bethlehem that first Christmas Eve were not the result of human effort. Human beings did not reach out and lay hold of God. We did not reach out and bring God to us in human form. It was the other way around; the love of God became a human being and lived among us.

We human beings never instigate a relationship with God. It is always God who makes the first move. I think this is what Phillips Brooks was trying to say in one verse of his Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” when we wrote, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

On the one hand stands the deepest single hope and desire of all human beings — the desire to be at one with our Source, to know and experience on an intimate, personal level God, who is the reason for our being. The Psalmist wrote, “As a heart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?”

Often this longing for God is camouflaged or disguised. We use other language to describe it. Some say they are searching for “meaning” in their lives, or happiness. Others disguise the thirst in their lust for power or prestige or the drive for owning and possessing.

On the other hand, over against this God hunger, no matter how it is disguised, we have all sorts of fears. “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” The basic fear is that the God hunger cannot be satisfied.

There is the question or fear as to whether God exists at all. Or is God merely something we human beings create? A crutch? Bill Coffin said, “Sure, religion is a crutch, but who said you don’t limp?”

Others have said surely God does exist, but fear that this God is basically unknowable, or impersonal, or has no interest in human beings. Still others believe that the capacity to relate to God might exist, but God is too busy with other concerns to have any time for that.

The fears that preoccupy us are many in relation to God. In the past God has too often been pictured only as an angry judge, rather than a loving presence. Some are afraid that God will reject them.

Over against all these fears is the event of Christmas. “The love of God became a human being and lived among us.” Not only does God exist and can be known, but God takes the initiative to be among us and relate to us. God knows how to get in touch with human beings and does so. Not only does God exist, God cares! God loves us! God so loved the world that God gave the Son.

So, when these feelings of “God hunger” well up in us, remember we are not up against the non-existent, the unknowable, or the indifferent One. The very hunger itself is the first sign of God reaching out toward us. This point cannot be overstated. We do not have to initiate a relationship with God. God is the One who always does that. In fact, God wants to relate to you more than you want to relate to God. Not only does Christmas show that, but in every instance in the Old Testament stories of a God — human encounter, it is God who takes the initiative, and the same is true today.

2. The second thing to notice about Christmas and our coming into a personal relationship with God is this: God frequently comes to us in unexpected and surprising ways. The biggest surprise of Christmas was this: no one expected God in a baby, lying in a manger. No one expected the mother of this baby to be a peasant girl from a small town.

The point is this: we often go wrong if we anticipate too specifically how God will enter our world or lives or how we will come into contact with or experience God. Isaiah reminds us, “God’s ways are not our ways; neither are God’s thoughts our thoughts.”

Our metaphors used in attempting to describe God, if taken too literally, can limit our expectation. Thus, some people expect to hear God speaking to them in a voice using human words. We forget that even we human beings communicate with each other in many other ways, as well. We communicate with a look, with our eyes, with our bodies, with gestures, with silence.

Sometimes we will hear someone describe his or her personal experience with God, and then we expect that if we have some kind of personal experience, it will have to be in the same way. Why limit it to that? We’re all different individuals, and we experience the world around us in different ways, so it makes sense that our religious experiences would also be varied.

God caught everyone by surprise that first Christmas, and this aspect of God’s dealing with us is just as important as understanding that God is always the initiator of religious experience.

It comes down to this: you cannot manufacture experiences with God, nor can you anticipate them specifically. But there are some things you can do. You can make yourself ready. You can be open and prepared. You can make room in your life.

Thus, you see, we human beings do have a role in all this interaction. We are to be expectant, but not demanding. It does not help to say, “I want a Damascus Road experience now just like St. Paul had. And unless I see visions, hear voices, or feel overwhelming emotions, I do not think God is having anything to do with me.”

Too often we decide ahead of time what an experience with God will be like or should be like, and then we go looking for that, rather than at what is actually going on within and about us. I really believe that the two biggest obstacles to authentic religious experience are our thinking we can instigate them on demand and that they will correspond to patterns we have conceived ahead of time.

It’s like a young man I once knew who had in his mind a certain type o woman who would one day become his wife. He had never met such a woman, and he never did, because he was never able to alter his picture of his ideal type. He’ll never know how many wonderful people he missed along the way.

Recently I read about a clown whose routine on stage began with a circle of light in the center of the empty stage. The clown entered and began looking around intensely. After a while he was joined by a policeman, who asked, “Have you lost something?” The clown answered, “Yes, the key to my house,” and the policeman began to search with him. After several minutes the policeman said, “Are you sure you lost it here?” To which the clown replied, “No, I lost it over there,” pointing to a dark part of the stage. “Then why on earth are you looking here?” asked the policeman. “Because there is no light over there,” answered the clown.

There’s a truth in this kind of humor. Too often we limit our search for something to a place where it does not exist. And this can be true of religious experiences. If we try to manufacture religious experiences or only accept them if they fit our preconceived patterns, then we’re probably going to be disappointed.

Some individuals find that their relationship to God develops very slowly and gradually. There is for them no one moment that can be identified as that exact time when they had a deeply spiritual experience. In this case it’s like trying to remember the exact moment or time when you were fully aware that your mother was indeed your mother.

So, this morning let the experience of Christmas help you in your hunger for a closer and more personal relationship with God. Be open to the fact that God will often surprise you and will come into your life in a most unexpected way and an unexpected time. And it is God who takes the initiative. This will take a spirit of trust on your part, also patience and openness. Keep your hope alive. Do not let your fears dominate.

One more point that intrigues me as we prepare to celebrate Christmas: just as we sometimes limit our idea of what a personal relationship to God might be like, and thus miss it altogether, sometimes we also limit our idea as to what makes Christmas truly Christmas. Some people say, for example, that it doesn’t seem like Christmas unless there’s snow. Others say it’s not Christmas without a tree or without gifts. People talk about having an “old-fashioned” Christmas, although I’m not sure exactly what that is.

Many Christmas cards contain pictures or drawings of a so-called “old-fashioned” Christmas with a horse-drawn sleigh, candles in the windows, something perhaps out of the 18th century. But why not the fourth century to make it truly old-fashioned? Do you think that Christmas card pictures 200 years from now will have pictures on them with people in 20th century clothing, with people in their antique Chevrolet Malibus or Honda Accords or Ford Tempos, in front of their split-level suburban homes with an old-fashioned electric lighted tree in the window, and perhaps a quaint old snowmobile parked somewhere in the background?

Christmas is much more than all the cultural and nostalgic additions we have connected with it. The coming of Christmas does not depend on us. We cannot manufacture the “Christmas spirit.” It is a gift from God, and we only need to be open to it. Do not make Christmas conditional on whether or not there is snow or gifts or a tree or anything else. In the same way, do not make an experience of God conditional. You cannot make God happen. Nor can you know exactly how and when you will experience God.

“The hope and fears of all the years” did come together in Bethlehem, and it is an event of good news. Christmas then and now says God not only does exist and can be known. God wants to be in a relationship with us, and God takes the initiative. All we need to do is to make room, be open and ready to receive God. And remember, God comes to us in unexpected and surprising ways. You might experience God in a relationship with other people. You might meet God when you are being of help to someone. Jesus said, “As you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it unto me.” You might meet God in a period of silent prayer — but you have to make room. Some people meet God and never know it. Anyplace and anyone can become Bethlehem and the manger and receive God. Amen.