Sunday, February 26, 1995
THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S PRESENCE
Luke 9:28-36

In thinking and talking about God, I often hear people say, "I believe in God, but seldom, if ever, feel God's presence in a way that makes much difference in my life." Others might say, "I very much want to experience the power and peace of God's presence in my daily life, yet I'm not sure what difference it would make." Still others wonder, "Perhaps God is present in me and in my life, but I don't recognize God as being there."

If these are some of your questions concerning the mystery of God's presence, here's an analogy that has been helpful to me. People who believe in God but seldom, if ever, feel the power of God's presence are something like people who believe in music but maybe have not experienced the power of music. They know that music exists, they hear it, but it never moves them deeply. Music does not touch them in the deepest recesses of their souls like it does for others.

Here's another analogy. People who believe in God but have not, as far as they know, felt God's presence very much are like people who believe that the earth goes around the sun. They have been told that it does, told by people who are supposed to know, and whose authority they trust, but it doesn't look as if it does, and they never feel the cosmic motion in their bones. They don't feel as though the ground they are standing on is moving.

So, what are some answers to the mystery of God's presence and power in our lives? First, you need to know that very few people, if any, experience the mystery of God's presence in their lives all the time or with the same intensity. For most of us, it's an uneven experience. There are times when God's love seems very much active in us and when God's Spirit seems very much present, but there are other times when God seems far away.

This is because our own receptivity is uneven, which shouldn't surprise us because our receptivity for many experiences varies from person to person. For example, sometimes we are more open to God's presence and God's love, and at other times, our lives are so filled with other things that we are not as receptive. God's presence is there, but we are not aware of it or don't take the time to pay attention to it. The same is true in our human relationships. There are also times when we don't want to experience God's power. We don't want to be bothered with God.

A second point to note is this: you will probably not experience the presence of God in the same way you experience the presence of another person or in the same way you experience other objects in your everyday life. God is not another object or person.

In the Bible and in our everyday conversation, God is often addressed and described in terms that we use to address and describe other people, but that is because our language is inadequate for defining or describing God, so we have to talk about God in metaphors and in terms of a person. But that does not mean that you will necessarily experience God's presence in the same way you feel the presence of another human being. Yet there's a deep mystery here because the love of God is being felt by you whenever you experience the love of another person. God is not a person in the way that we are persons, but God works through other people and through us.

We often say that God is invisible, inaudible, and intangible. You are not a stranger to this experience. Here's another analogy. This room is filled at this moment with all kinds of radio and television waves, but you cannot see them or even hear them unless you have the proper radio or television receiver to turn them into sound and pictures that your ears can hear, your eyes see, and your brain interpret. Simply because you cannot hear, see, physically touch, smell, or taste something does not mean it is not present.

Another example: what is an electron, proton, neutron, or quark? According to modern physics, as I understand it, they are all bits of energy that we cannot see but which are the basic stuff of everything that is. Simply because we cannot see them with our eyes does not mean they don't exist. There's a lot of everyday reality that we cannot hear, see, touch, taste, or smell.

What is love? One small dictionary describes it as "a feeling of warm personal attachment for another human being." But we all know there is more to love than any group of words can describe. You have experienced the power of love. You have seen love in action. But love is still more than all of that.

Part of the problem is that most of our daily contact with the world outside of us is through the basic five senses — touch, sight, hearing, taste, and smell. These are the everyday doorways through which we enter the world around us and through which the world comes into us and registers itself upon our consciousness. We sometimes assume that we know all of reality through these five senses, and that if we can't experience it through one or more of the five, it doesn't exist.

But we also talk about a sixth sense. You go into a home, for example. As far as you can see and hear, everything is normal, everything is in order, but you sense that something is wrong; there is trouble somewhere; something has happened that has upset the family. You can sense the tension in the air.

Or you do something that costs you a great deal. You sense that it is right or wrong, not because it obeys or violates any law or because someone has told you that it is right or wrong. It is something you sense.

Or you meet a person. You don't know anything about that individual. You dare not make any judgment because you don't know enough about that person, but you sense that he or she is a person of integrity, or in another case, you sense that he or she is someone you cannot trust. There are a lot of things in life that we sense, but not through our usual five senses.

In a similar way, we can say that we sense God's presence. But we have to talk about it as though we had seen it, felt it, or heard it because there isn't much of any other way to describe it.

That's true of many religious experiences. The Bible is filled with such incidents. One day, when Jesus took three disciples with him on the mountain to pray, Jesus had an experience similar to that which he had when he was baptized, which let him know again that God was with him and working through him. The three disciples who were with him were aware that God's mysterious presence was there in a powerful way. They were aware that Jesus had had a powerful experience of the mystery of God's presence, but how could they define it?

As they remembered it later, the only way they could describe it was as if they had seen it. They said that while Jesus was praying, his face seemed to change, and his clothes became

dazzling white. They also saw Moses and Elijah with him. They appeared in glory. In other words, these three disciples were present with Jesus when he experienced the power and holiness of God in a way that was new to them. It was not something they expected or planned for.

Now you may be thinking, “I’ve never had that kind of experience.” My answer is, “Not everyone does, but that does not make you any less loved by God. Nor does it mean that God is any less present in your life.”

The fact is that when it comes to experiencing the mystery of God’s presence, we vary tremendously from one another. Some seem to be more sensitive to that presence than others. That’s true with our five senses. Some people are more sensitive to sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch than others.

The difference in sensitivity is equally noticeable in the area of what we call spiritual things, invisible things. Some people are more sensitive to the feelings of other people. And there are those who seem completely insensitive to what another person is feeling. Of course, you can never be sure of that, but judging by the things they say and do, the only conclusion you can draw is that they are blissfully unaware of what the other person feels when the critical or embarrassing word is spoken, or when the cruel deed is done. Some people are more sensitive artistically than others, more sensitive to line, color, shape, and form.

Some people have an eye for beauty, others have an ear for music, and some seem to have more of a feeling for God. We all have different capacities and abilities, but that does not make one person better than another.

However, I would go on to say as emphatically as possible that there is no human being totally incapable of knowing God’s presence, that there is no human being who has no sense of awe, mystery, majesty, or glory. No one is totally immune to the Divine. Nor is there anyone who totally knows God. There is always mystery. The spiritual journey in this life never ends.

To affirm God as mystery is not a cop-out. It is saying that we can never know God completely. And God is not the only mystery in life that we can never know completely. The more we know, the more we are aware of what we don’t know.

You have heard me quote Dr. Lewis Thomas frequently. He said, “The greatest of all the accomplishments of 20th-century science has been the discovery of human ignorance.” There was a time in human history, not very long ago, when we thought that we would soon know everything. And to hear some religious people talk today, they already know everything there is to know about God and God’s will.

Having said all of this, there are some steps we can take to help us be more open and sensitive to the mystery of God’s presence.

First of all, be yourself in relating to God. Relax, take off your mask. In God’s presence, you can drop the “shoulds,” the “have to’s,” and “musts,” and replace them with innocence, spontaneity, and curiosity. Accept the fact that you are vulnerable. Drop your defenses. God accepts you as you are. You don’t need to put on a holy front or try to impress God in any way. Listen to your innermost thoughts. Discover and live out your best instincts. They are all part of God within you.

Second, where you are, as well as who you are, has something to do with your receptivity. Places have a wonderful way of evoking presence. That's why the architecture of church buildings is so important. The place is not the presence, but it can help make the presence more real, despite the fact that God is not limited to any time or place. It can affect our mood of receptivity. That's why Jesus took the three disciples to a quiet place to pray.

I can still remember the first time I visited Israel and walked where Jesus walked. Being in old Jerusalem, in Bethlehem, in Nazareth, on the Sea of Galilee, in the Garden of Gethsemane—all of these places gave me a feeling of the mystery of the presence of God in a fresh way. God's presence is everywhere, but we are more open to it in some places.

Third, it helps us to be aware of the mystery of God's presence in our lives when we admit that we cannot live our lives by ourselves and that there is a power greater than any of us. Recovering alcoholics have told me over and over again that their sense of God's presence came in the moment when they were at the bottom and admitted they needed help.

God does not force us, but waits for our invitation in whatever form it is given. At the same time, God never gives up on anyone but is always waiting to be a more integral part of our lives. Remember those beautiful words of Jesus: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone opens it, I will come in."

And there's one more thing we can learn about the mystery of God's presence in our lives from this story of Jesus on the mountain with three disciples. When you experience the mystery of God's presence in some new way, don't talk about it too soon. "And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen." When the Gospel of Matthew tells this same story, it says, "Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about this vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'"

He was saying, "You've had a new experience of the mystery of God's presence. You're not ready to completely understand or comprehend it, so don't tell anyone about it yet. You've still got some spiritual growing to do." In other words, there's a time to speak and a time to keep silent.

Oftentimes, we talk about experiences too quickly. When we have a traumatic experience, positive or negative, reporters ask the person too soon, "What are your feelings?" before anyone has had time to sort out their feelings or emotions. There are overwhelming experiences, both joyful and tragic, that need a period of incubation or germination in our consciousness before we are ready to understand or talk about them.

"And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen." Do you know people who tell too much too soon? They're always talking about when they were saved, how it changed their life forever, and how we need to have the same experience. Somehow it seems as if all their energy gets used up in talking about it, and there's not much left for living it.

There are times when we need to let the energy of the vision work within us. In talking about it too soon, we can misinterpret the experience and what it means. Sometimes, only in looking back at the experience will we understand it. Then we can talk about it.

The mystery of God's presence — the faithful mystics throughout history who have known some of the deep mysteries of the Divine, speak of them prudently, reservedly, cautiously, and

with difficulty. The deepest spiritual experiences are, for the most part, inexpressible. When they need to be told to someone, they must be talked about carefully, reverently, and humbly with the sense that there is still much lacking in our knowledge of God. Amen.