Sunday, February 14, 1999
TELL NO ONE UNTIL...
Matthew 17:1-9

Jesus and three of his disciples were returning from an unforgettable spiritual adventure, and his first command to them was surprising.

“As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, ‘Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'”

Before we talk more about our own unforgettable spiritual occurrences or lack of them, how we recognize them, and what we do with them, here’s a bit of trivia.

Note especially that Jesus did not say to his disciples, “Share the vision with no one.” He said, “Tell no one.” I’m tired of people over-using and mis-using the word “share.” I did a little research this past week in the New Testament and discovered to my pleasant surprise that in all of the English translations of the New Testament that I could find, and I have many of them, Jesus did not use the word “share” one time as a verb.

In all four gospels, he only used the word “share” once, and that was as a noun, and I found it in only one English translation. In the story of the prodigal son, Jesus quotes the younger son saying to his father, “Give me my share of the inheritance.” Other English translations say, “Give me my portion of the inheritance.”

The official dictionary definition of the word “share” when used as a verb is: “to divide and parcel out in shares; to apportion.” To put it another way, when I share something with you, I give you a part and keep some for myself. I divide it between you and me.

Usually, when someone says to me, “I have something to share with you,” they mean, “I have something to tell you.” Sometimes, when a person says to me, “I have something to share with you,” I say in response, “Which part are you going to tell or give me, and which part are you going to keep for yourself?”

Not long ago, I heard a television news reporter say, “I’m now going to share the news with you.” The more I thought about it, maybe he was telling the truth. He was going to tell me only some of the news and keep the rest for himself. But who knows, maybe he kept the best part of the news for himself? I think if I ever hear a preacher announce that he or she is going to share a sermon with me, I’ll walk out before the sharing gets underway.

Perhaps those of us who call ourselves Christians over-use the word “share” because it sounds so warm and fuzzy, so generous. But the more I think about it, I would rather have someone tell me something or give me something rather than only share it.

But enough of this personal detour. The deeper question I want us to consider is, why did Jesus instruct his disciples to “tell no one about their deeply moving revelatory experience on the mountain, until much later?”

To understand his command, we need first to talk about those experiences of revelation that come to all of us in many different ways.

What does the Bible mean when it talks about “Divine revelation” as illustrated in this story? Divine revelation is an experience of the holy or transcendent which enables us to see beyond our usual human limited capacities.

When the three disciples were on the mountain with Jesus, they had an experience which helped them to see and understand God and Jesus in a different way than they had understood before. Their old vision was replaced with a new vision.

It’s similar to what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus. According to that story in the book of Acts, Saul, who later had his name changed to Paul, was on the way to Damascus to persecute Christians when suddenly a light flashed around him. He heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He was then told to continue on his way to the city and he would learn what to do next. He was blind for three days, and when his sight was restored, his old vision was replaced with a new vision. He had a new understanding of God and Jesus which he had not had before.

He did not immediately become a missionary, but there was a period of incubation and preparation. We’ll talk more about this later.

The experience of Paul and the three disciples who were with Jesus on the mountain tells us that revelation involves being inspired by the Spirit of God to see things differently and to make changes.

We can see revelation at work in the lives of people in all kinds of circumstances, those who think of themselves as religious and those who do not.

Helen Baylor, now a gospel singer, tells how a revelation that she received entirely redirected her life. After years of alcohol and drug addiction, she emerged from obscurity in 1991 to become a changed person with a new career path.

When she was 13 years old, she began performing as an opening act for established rhythm and blues artists. When she was sixteen, she gave birth to a baby she could not care for, and by the time she was eighteen, she was addicted to pills and cocaine. After being addicted to drugs for over a decade, Baylor found herself alone one night, drunk and high, flipping through the channels on her television until she came upon a Christian program. She had a revelation that night, similar to that of the three disciples on the mountain with Jesus.

Not all of Helen Baylor’s problems were solved immediately. Listen to her words: “Not all my bills were paid, not all of my problems were gone, and I still looked the same except that my countenance was brighter and had new life.”

The big difference was that she no longer wanted to sing secular music, and she believed God was going to use her voice in a new way. But again, it didn’t happen all at once. It was almost as if Jesus had said to her, as he did to the three disciples, “Tell no one about this until...” She worked in a church and sat in church for six years before she sang professionally again. Even though she was in the church choir, it was years before she was even asked to sing a solo.

What about you and me, our spiritual encounters or our lack of them? In thinking and talking about God, I hear many people say, “I believe in God, but seldom if ever sense God’s presence in a way that seems to make much difference in my life.”

I hear other people say, “I want very much to experience the power and peace of God’s presence, yet I’m not sure what difference it would make, and I’m even a little afraid of the changes it would make.”

Still others say, “Perhaps God is present in me and in my life, but I don’t recognize God as being there.”

Here are some answers to these longings that have been very helpful to me.

First, you need to know that very few people, if any, experience the revelation of God’s presence in their lives all the time with the same intensity. For most of us, it’s an uneven experience. There are times when God’s power seems very much active in us, and at other times, it is less active.

That’s because our own receptivity is uneven. That shouldn’t surprise us because our receptivity for many experiences varies from person to person and from time to time. Sometimes I can go to a concert and be very moved by the music, and at other times, I am not as inspired. Sometimes writing a sermon comes very easy because I am inspired, and at other times, it’s plain hard work.

Second, in experiencing or being aware of God’s presence in our lives, we vary tremendously from one to another. Some seem to be more sensitive to the Divine Presence than others. That’s also true with our five senses. Some people are more sensitive to sight or sound or smell or taste or touch than others.

The difference in sensitivity is equally noticeable in personal relationships. Some people are more sensitive to the feelings of others. And there are some who are not as sensitive to what another person is experiencing.

There are those who have an ear for music and some who do not. We all have different capacities and abilities, but that does not make one person more valuable than another.

However, I want to say as emphatically as possible that there is no human being totally incapable of being aware of God’s presence. In his book, Timeless Healing, Dr. Herbert Benson calls this being “wired for God.” There is no human being who has no sense of awe, mystery, majesty, or glory. No one is totally immune to the Divine. And the opposite is also true — no one 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.

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

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 the “musts” and replace them with innocence, spontaneity, and curiosity. Be open. 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.

The three disciples who accompanied Jesus on the mountain were open to his invitation to go along. They were not sure what was going to happen, but they were receptive. The other nine who stayed back missed an opportunity. Maybe they thought they already knew enough about God and God's will.

Second, where you are, as well as who you are, can have 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 in spite of the fact that God is not limited to any time or place. Environment can help us to pay attention, to listen. That's why Jesus took the three disciples to a quiet place to pray.

Last November, I had the privilege of being in the Holy Land again and of walking 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 new sense of the mystery of God's presence. What we call the "Holy Land" is not any more holy than any other place, but being there reminded me that all places can be holy. God's presence is everywhere, but we are more sensitive to it in some places.

Third, it helps to be more open to God's presence in our lives when we are able to admit that we cannot live our lives by ourselves.

Earlier I mentioned Helen Baylor's newfound sense of God's power in her life. She said, "It wasn't until I called upon the name of Jesus out of a pure heart to want to be free, that things changed. That night, the revelation was, I once was lost, but now I'm found. Old things truly passed away."

God does not force us, but waits for an opening in whatever form it is given. Sometimes it is very gradual, a kind of evolving awareness, and other times more instantaneous. Remember those beautiful words of Jesus, "Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone opens it, I will come in."

There's one more thing to remember about God's revelatory experiences in our lives, no matter what form they might take. Jesus said, "Tell no one... until." When you experience the mystery of God's presence in some new way, don't talk about it too soon. Think about it. Let it work inside you.

Why? Jesus was saying, "You've had a new experience with the Spirit of God. You cannot immediately understand or comprehend it, so don't tell anyone about it. You've still got some spiritual growing to do." Jesus followed his own example. When he was being baptized by John the Baptist, he felt God's power and acceptance in a way he had not known before. What did he do? He spent time alone to sort it all out. The Bible says "forty days and forty nights."

We can talk about or try to explain life-changing occurrences too quickly. More often than not, they need a period of incubation or germination in our consciousness. Revelation is a divine communication that can stop us in our tracks and then lead us to another path which will take time to follow. We do not always understand instantly, therefore "tell no one... until."

We've all known people who tell us too much too soon. They're always talking about when they were saved, how it changed their life, and how we need to have the exact same experience.

Somehow it seems as if all their energy gets used up talking about it, and there's not much left for living it.

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 revelations 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. "Tell no one... until." Amen.