

Life in the Cloud, Part 3

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Exodus 6:2-9; Hebrews 11:23-28; 12:1-2

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. . . .”
-- Hebrews 12:1-2

On Interstate 71, somewhere between here and Columbus, stands a billboard that says in stark white letters against a black background, “Prepare to meet God.” Underneath those gigantic four words is an 888- number and a verse from the Bible. I’m not sure if God will answer if I dial that 888- number, or, since I’m headed north when I see that billboard, if I’ll meet God when I reach Cleveland.

But aside from the somewhat frivolous questions that billboard evokes in what is left of my mind, it leaves a more serious and seriously distasteful impression with me, and that impression takes the form of this question: “Well, what do you think I’ve been doing with my life, if not meeting God?”

I know, because I was once part of fundamentalist Christianity, that the theology behind that roadside warning – and it is, in fact, a warning with an implied threat – is that we meet God when we die, and that if we’re not ready for that encounter, we’re in big trouble.

This is that strand of theological thought that is deeply woven into Christianity; it goes back many centuries. It’s the sort of thinking that led W. C. Fields to be found leafing madly through a Bible one day as he neared the end of his life. Someone asked him what he was looking for and he replied, “Loopholes.”

Our unease may not be as great as that when we hold our lives up to the standards of Scripture, but most of us feel, in varying degrees, that when it comes to being the people our religious tradition tells us we ought to be, and the people we tell ourselves we ought to be, we don’t measure up.

We all know of folks for whom the rites of the church have taken on more than religious and spiritual significance and have slipped over the edge into a perception that seems to some of us magical at best and superstitious at worst. This is a problem the church has struggled with from the beginning, and it was one of the chief causes of that sixteenth-century split in western Christianity that we call the Reformation.

The first baptism I ever performed, when I was a student chaplain in a hospital in Houston, was for a two-year-old girl who had fallen into a swimming pool and drowned. She was kept on life support for a few days until her parents finally came to terms with the fact that she would not survive, and when the time came for the machines to be turned off, I was the chaplain on call who was summoned to baptize the little girl before she died. Now as a Baptist, as I was in those days, baptizing a two-year-old who would not have been alive save for the machines to which she was connected, this baptism was

fraught, and I knew that some among whom I had been raised would have disapproved of what I was about to do. But I saw it then, and would see it even more so today, as my pastoral duty to bring what comfort and consolation I could bring to those shattered parents; and if they were afraid that their beloved child was in some way in danger of being excluded from God's eternal care and keeping, then I was prepared to set aside all my personal, theological, and very Protestant scruples and do what needed doing under the circumstances. It never occurred to me then and does not occur to me now that that little girl was in any danger which the sacrament of baptism could forestall; I administered the rite for the parents, not for the child. What their understanding was is known only to each of them and to God.

Many Christians have long thought that the time for preparation to meet one's maker is when we are *in extremis*, that is, at the end of our days and the end of our rope; it's where the term formerly used for anointing the sick – extreme unction – comes from. We gather our rosebuds while we may, for years and decades on end, oblivious not so much to our impending end, but rather to the grace of God that surrounds every day, the revelation of God that illumines every blade of grass, and the voice of God that speaks without words and without ceasing for those with the spirits to hear. Missing all of that, it seems to me, is the real and grave tragedy that lies behind billboard theology that warns, "Prepare to meet God." It is not that we'll miss eternal life someday, but that we're already missing it to-day.

The quote on the front of last Sunday's order of service was from the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, whose works have been so helpful to people attempting to live more contemplative lives. From one of his letters, collected in the book, *School of Charity*, Merton writes: "It is good and praiseworthy to look at some real created thing and feel and appreciate its reality. Just let the reality of what is real sink into you. . . . For through real things we reach Him who is infinitely real."

That's how we Christians understand reality. Reality is not an illusion for us; it's really real. Our perceptions of reality can be – and in fact always are – faulty, but that is not the same as denying a reality behind our faulty perceptions. It is that reality behind the apparently real of which Merton speaks and to which he believes the serious contemplation of true reality can lead us. Contemplation, among other things, is meant to help correct our faulty perceptions, which is how contemplation helps us to grow spiritually. Contemplation asks us to let reality sink into us and for us to immerse ourselves in reality, for we believe that both are good creations of a loving creator.

Some of you probably know what I'm talking about as deism, the school of thought from the eighteenth century that says, essentially, if there's a watch there has to be a watchmaker. If there's a creation, there has to be a creator. The God of deism made the world, set it ticking, and then walked off into heaven and lets the world go on its merry and miserable way, pretty much on its own. God does not intervene in the world, and so all the stories about miracles that make up so much of the Bible are snipped out – and Thomas Jefferson, one of our country's best-known deists, literally did snip the miracle stories out of his Bible, which you can see at the Smithsonian today, and soon you'll be able to see it on line.

And perhaps some of you consider yourselves deists, too, and you'd certainly have a distinguished lineage. But the tradition with which I most closely identify myself is that Reformed tradition which says that there are two books of revelation: the book of nature and the book of Scripture, and you need both if you're to grasp the grandeur and mystery of God. Jonathan Edwards, that dour New England Puritan, is our country's greatest theologian of this tradition, and Edwards saw God's intervention in the world not so much in the uncharacteristic and inexplicable – which is what most people think of when they

think of miracles – but rather in the miraculous fact of existence itself. This is the line of thought that runs straight to Albert Einstein, who said that “There are two ways to live: you can live as if nothing is a miracle or you can live as if everything is a miracle.” Einstein preferred the latter, and so do I. In fact, the older I get the more convinced I am that it’s all a miraculous gift.

When the author of the book of Hebrews speaks of that great cloud of witnesses, about which Donna read for us a while ago, he spoke of part of that miraculous gift. He spoke of those people and events that revealed to him God’s ongoing work in the world. The passage Donna read for us this morning was about the faith of Moses, to whom Jews, Christians, and Muslims all look as the preeminent recipient of divine revelation. And the passage from Exodus that I read talks about the ongoing nature of that revelation, namely, that the name that God had given Moses’s ancestors was not the same name revealed to Moses, and part of Moses’s faith – a very great part – was to trust that the God who had led the chosen people by one name was the same God who was now calling Moses to lead those people in a different time and in a different place and in a different way under a different name.

That’s scary. When it comes to God, most of us grow very conservative very quickly. When we’re finally convinced that we’ve grasped ultimate reality – what Paul Tillich called our Ultimate Concern, God, in other words – our natural tendency is to cling to our perceptions of God with ferocious tenacity. Religious people can become profoundly resistant to change, fearful that a new revelation is leading us not to God but rather astray.

But all those people in that great cloud of witnesses faced the same fearful prospect, and all of them, by virtue of their faith, faced down their fear. All of the witnesses who have come down through the ages as inspirations to us had to navigate the waters of their day that were no less treacherous than ours are, and believing then was no easier than believing is now.

“Ye fearful saints,” William Cowper wrote, “fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head.”

Dear fearful saints, be of good courage. In the midst of wars in Syria and Afghanistan, and rumors of wars in North Korea and Iran; in the midst of struggles for power to control terrorism and control of the sources of knowledge; in the midst of political confusion in Congress and unrest in Turkey and Brazil, be not afraid. God’s grace is sufficient for all our challenges and all our needs, as all those witnesses testify. For the living of these days, we have everything we need – and more.

Let us pray. God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Give us the grace to live one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace, and taking, as our Savior did, this sinful world as it is and not as we would have it. Help us to trust that Christ will make all things right if we surrender to his will; so that we may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him in the life to come. Amen.