

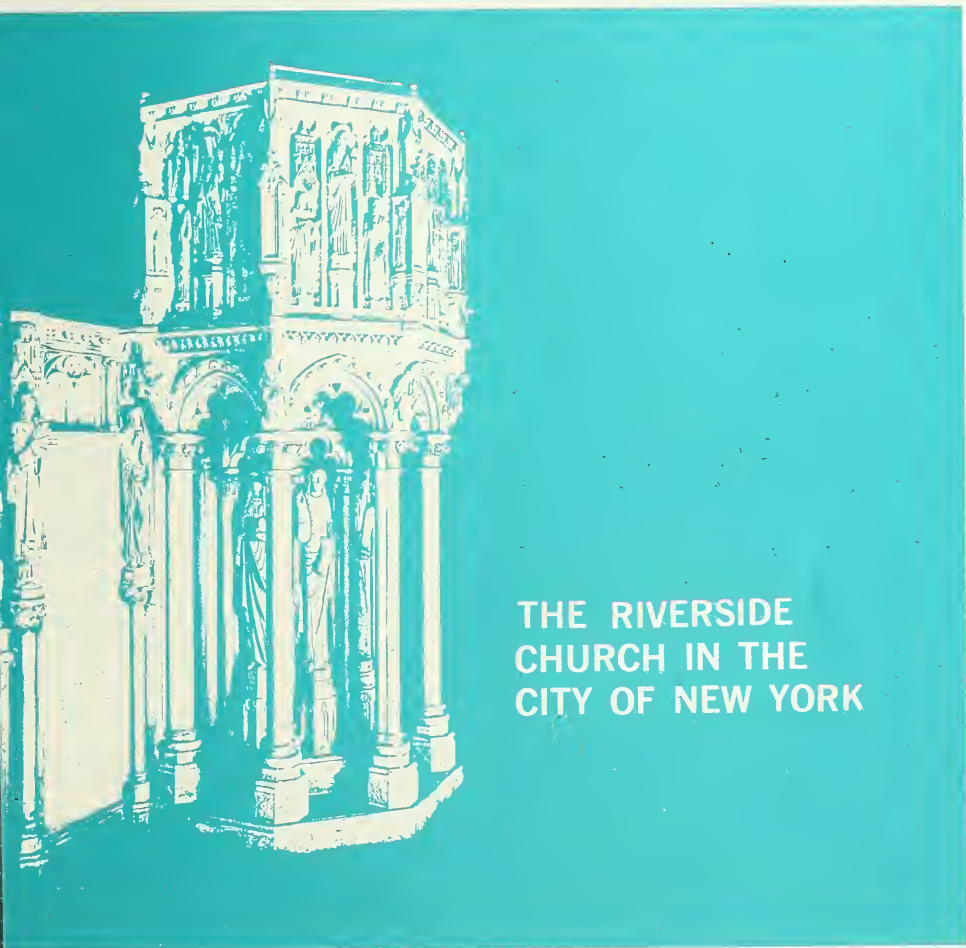
SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

ON WAKING TO THE 'AH!' OF THINGS


*"Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said,
'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I
did not know it!'"* *Genesis 28:16*

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



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"Have you noticed how clean and glistening the cobble stones in the street are after the rain? And flowers? No word can describe them. One can only exclaim Ah! in admiration. You must learn to understand the Ah! of things." These are the words of a Zen master. They came to me by way of Alan Torey, a friend -- an Australian by birth, a preacher by training, currently teaching in a college on the West Coast -- who has just written a highly original book entitled, Wonder. "You must learn to understand the Ah! of things."

* * *

We live in an age more accurately characterized by Blah than Ah! Both exclamations are phonetically close but that is their only similarity.

Our television sets have progressed from black and white to color, but our daily lives have regressed from color to black and white! We deal more and more with faceless corporations. Spend unnumbered hours each year filling out devilishly inquisitive forms. Our eyes strain to read the digits by which computers know us. Just as plastics have triumphed over wood, so artificiality has taken the measure of genuineness in human affairs.

In the interest of efficiency, Post Offices no longer mark a letter by its place of origin. It is as though our mail came from zones instead of people. The romance has all but disappeared from the telephone. Why, years ago in New York City exchanges like Rhineland, Tompkins Square, Algonquin, Wadsworth, Gramercy, Murray Hill, University lent their charm to human contacts. Now seven numbers are all one needs to know.

Add to this the stress that is placed on production in our society. The need to make, the need to succeed, the need to achieve, the need to amass, store up, acquire and display have a way of disqualifying us for reflection and anesthetizing the faculty of awe.

Add one thing more, the loss of a sense of the holy in American religious experience. Sincerely motivated to render God contemporary, we have managed by all manner of gimcrackery to trivialize the holy, reduce prayer to an exercise in slang and make worship either coldly rational or unintelligible emotional.

I heard it said in seriousness the other day that the rise of the charismatic movement in the Roman Catholic church can be traced, at least in part, to the abandonment of the Latin mass. We live in an age more conducive to Blah than Ah!

* * *

Tear that picture from the pad and on a fresh sheet construct another scene. A young man is traveling alone on a long journey. He has left home under less than happy circumstances. Largely on his mother's advice he deceived his brother and gained the family birthright falsely. He heads for Haran -- there to stay with an uncle until his brother cools.

Night falls and Jacob commandeers a stone for a pillow and prepares to sleep. As he sinks into unconsciousness he discovers himself present at an unutterable sight. He envisions a staircase linking earth to heaven and on it angels descending and ascending. Above it all stood the Lord.

Then a voice said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants... and by you shall all the families of the earth be blest." The story of Jacob's life is interpreted for him. Those little episodes of dirty tricks are gathered now into the larger purposes of God. The what and how of things are enlightened by the why and who.

His destiny is announced: "I will give you and your followers this land." A presence is promised him: "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." Not bad for one night's sleep!

Then Jacob, awaking from his sleep, said, Ah!... Ah!... "Surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God. And this is the gate of heaven." And he called the name of the place Bethel which means house of God.

* * *

Don't say it! Please don't say it! You must never say it! "That couldn't happen to me!" It is God's nature to come, to speak, to illumine. Sometimes in a flaming bush, sometimes in a still small voice, sometimes in earthquake, wind or fire. Here in an urban temple, there on an open road. This time in a subway, next on a lunch hour break in Battery Park!

Marghanita Laski has made a study of ecstasy. She suggests that ecstasy can be triggered by such things as natural scenery, such as fine weather, being near the sea, and so on; sexual love involving the total person; childbirth, especially the sight of the first child; exercise and movement, such as swimming or flying; religion, such as being in vespers in a foreign cathedral; art, especially religious art; scientific knowledge, such as solving a difficult mathematical problem; poetic knowledge; creative works, such as suddenly being able to express something in permanent form; recollection and introspection, such as calling up vivid images from the past; beauty and the encounter of the beautiful. 1

We are not required to create the Ah! occasions. They are already there. We simply have to learn to wonder as we wander and recognize them when they happen. What you see is what you get. And what you want is what you see!

* * *

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Twenty-three days from now we will celebrate the birth of Jesus. You can fill those intervening days with the busyness that is manufactured by custom. Or you can let the glory of the story possess you, illumine for you your past, your present, your future.

In a matter of minutes we will gather about the table of the Lord where God's presence is both pledged and concentrated. For some it will be a Blah occasion. For many it can be a time of waking to the Ah! of bread and cup. Don't let the mechanics of communion distract you. Pay them no mind. The ministers know the words. The deacons know their routes. The organist knows his instrument. Give yourself not to such. Rather open yourself to the wonder of what is present here.

Sam Keen has said, "To wonder is to die to the self, to cease to impose categories, and to surrender the self to the object. Such a risk is taken only because there is the promise of the resurrection of meaning." 2

Some years ago I had the pleasure of visiting the city of Romsey in southern England -- a community not too far north of Southampton, a port of embarkation for many travelers over many years. It was then with more than common interest that I picked up a book by Hugh Ross Williamson, an Anglican cleric, whose father had been a Congregational minister in that city fifty years ago. Almost to the anniversary day of his father's installation in the Congregational Chapel, Williamson found himself preaching in Romsey Abbey. Let him tell you how he felt: "When the evening came and I walked slowly in procession from the sacristy, holding my father's sermon case, I was cold with fear. The whole weight of the Abbey's ages was on me, its child, and its very familiarity was the most frightening thing of all.

"The nave was crowded. It seemed that Romsey had decided to come to church -- but, once I was in the pulpit, all apprehension vanished. It was, after all, only a simple family affair. I discarded the carefully

prepared sermon and spoke as simply as I could. Almost as if I were explaining to my father and to Gran why I was there.

"Except, of course, that they would by now understand far better than I did how bread and wine had to be the Body and Blood of God and why that was the central fact of all history and all life." 3

"Surely the Lord is in this place."

FOOTNOTES:

1. Oates, Wayne E., The Psychology of Religion, pp. 244-45, Word Books, Waco, Tex, 1973
2. Keen, Sam, Apology for Wonder, pp 27-31, Harper & Row, New York, 1970
3. Williamson, Hugh Ross, The Walled Garden, p. 43, The Macmillan Company, New York 1957

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