THE VISION

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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"A bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.' When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe."(Mt. 17:1-9)

Our Student Council has had a continuing discussion over the years concerning calling. The question has been this: should we go out and knock on doors along with everyone else? Imagine yourself as a new student. The doorbell rings and it's the representative from the Young Democrats or the Young Republicans. Again it rings and it's the representative from the Yearbook or Gordon Linen. Again it rings and it's the representative from University Lutheran Church. You'd wonder what that young Lutheran has to sell.

Yet however important the discussion about calling may be, I think it's only symptomatic of a much deeper question.

I.

We can approach this question by asking whether the Christian faith is but one alternative among many, or whether it is <u>the</u> alternative. And here we can be instructed, I think, by the story of the Transfiguration. This isn't an account of the discovery of some logical or empirical <u>proof</u> that Christian faith is the truth. It's not the story of the disclosure of something self-evident. It's the story of a <u>vision</u>, a captivating vision.

This means, then, that the Christian faith is just that: a faith. And even more, it means that Christian faith is therefore one among many. We think first, of course, of other religious faiths throughout the world. But that's not all. Non-religious people have their visions, too. The Marxist dreams of the heavenly world on the other side of the proletarian revolution. The captitalist dreams of himself as king of his world, basking in luxury, untroubled by economic or political disturbances. The humanist dreams of the day when man will finally come into his own, the day when man will be himself, putting off the shackles of superstition and ignorance. Even the pessimist has his vision, the vision of a world which is locked in the chains of necessity, remorselessly grinding out the fate of mankind.

Everyone has his own vision, which somehow offers him assurance, direction, and power for living. The Christian vision, then, is one among many alternatives. I, for one, have yet to hear anyone prove that it's the only one or the only truthful one.

Does this mean, then, that everything is relative, that it finally doesn't make any difference which vision you buy in the marketplace of life? No, I don't think that that follows. <u>One</u> of these faiths could be <u>the</u> faith. ...And that's the wager that Christians make. We venture to say that the vision of Christ is <u>the</u> vision, that here the

-2-

ultimate riddle of life is in the process of dissolution. That's the wager. All the Scriptures and all the sermons and all the rituals and all the cathedrals are predicated on that wager. That the vision we say we see is the vision.

II.

Christian faith is a wager, then. Yet it's not a wager without reason. This wager commends itself to us. It commends itself to us through the life of a group of people who come together to drink wine and break bread. It commends itself to us through the integrity and the joy and the love which we taste in that community. It commends itself to us through the lives of the people who tell of the vision.

"As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, 'Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead'." (Mt. 17:9) Some time later, according to the Gospel accounts, following the crucifixion, the disciples were gathered together for a meal when it dawned on them that they weren't alone, that their Lord was indeed with them in the breaking of bread. After that meal they then began to tell others of their vision. And their vision came alive for them continually in their common meal. So others were attracted to them, to their meal, and to their vision.

In a manner of speaking, we might say that their faces took on the light of the original vision. Faces speak a deep language. One need only think of the portraits of Rembrandt or Van Gogh. So St. Paul was deeply impressed by the faces of his fellow Christians. As he says, "We all, with unveiled face, reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another." (II Cor. 3:18) Paul actually uses the word transfiguration here: we are being transfigured into the likeness of Christ.

Perhaps those of us who are Lutherans can learn at this point from a man whose name isn't usually mentioned from Lutheran pulpits, Ulrich Zwingli. Quite apart from what Zwingli denied, I think we can be instructed by something he affirmed. Zwingli affirmed what he referred to as the transubstantiation of the believers as they participate in the Lord's Supper. In that drinking and in that eating, according to Zwingli, the gathered people becomes the Body of Christ. I don't think this is too far from St. Paul's meaning when he uses the word transfiguration. So when we partake in Our Lord's Supper our faces show forth the glory of the original vision. We reenact that vision.

In this way the wager of the disciples' vision of Christ has come to commend itself to you and to me, through the life of the people who gather to break bread in the name of Christ.

III.

But the light of the vision doesn't end there, or it ought not to. It extends beyond the meal as well. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house."(Mt. 5:14) Through the daily life of the Christian people, c'

then, the vision commends itself to the world, or it ought to.

At this point I keep recalling the words of Nietszche, the father of our modern death of god theologies. Nietszche once remarked that he would have believed in Christ, but that he never encountered any Christians. Which is to say that the light of the vision of Christ did not break through to him in the faces of Christian friends, that indeed he was not befriended by Christians.

Which is a serious reminder to us, who today enter again into the disciples' vision and into their transfiguration by the Light of Christ: that that Light should shine from our faces every day of the week, as well as when we gather together to break bread.

When this is foremost in our minds and in our lives, the problem whether or when we should knock on doors to tell people of our vision fades in significance. The chief matter is living a life which reflects that original vision.