September 23, 1959 H. Paul Santmire

If there is any one thing which distinguishes you and me from our forefathers, it is the fact that we are on speaking terms with space. We are very much aware that there are endless reaches of space above us and below us. Our newspapers tell us that within a short time, man himself will be probing the mysteries of this unknown world.

In this setting, an age-old question has taken on new significance. This is the question about the presence of God. The other day I overheard a six-year-old put this question in all its simplicity and perplexity: "Mother," he asked, "where is God?"

We may smile at the child's question, but I wonder if there is not considerable uneasiness behind our smiles. Where is God? Years ago people could answer such a question by pointing their fingers to the sky! But you and I live in the Space Age. Pointing our fingers to the heavens does not help us in the least. We know that when we point up, we are not pointing at God, we are in reality pointing at empty space, millions and millions of miles of it. Where is God? For you and for me this is a searching question.

I think that you will be surprised to find that the answer to this question is very familiar to you. I speak of what is perhaps the most treasured teaching of the Church, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It may seem strange that a Space Age question finds an answer in a traditional teaching of the Church. But the Holy Trinity is not a dead doctrine! It is a signpost which points us to the presence of the living God.

I.

God is the Father. This statement could be confusing were we to lose sight of the fact that here we are using a metaphor, a picture-word. We do not mean to suggest that God is Father in the same way as a human being is father. Yet there is a connection, otherwise we would not use the word. The father is he who not only begets children, but also it is he who supports the family in every way, providing food and shelter, love and protection. We sense this when we say that the father is "behind the family." In a similar sense God as the Father is He who is behind the world.

It is God the Father who provides us with food and shelter. It is God the Father who loves us and protects us. God does this from behind the world. As Luther said, the world is God's mask. From behind His mask God reaches out to all His creatures, nourishing them and supporting them. In a very real way human existence is like walking over a frozen lake. When you walk on the ice you must trust Another for your support -- whether you are to continue to live, or whether you are to go crashing through to nothingness. It is God the Father who supports our daily existence. He keeps us alive. Without His constant support and sustenance we and our world would no longer exist. So the Psalmist sings:

> The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein; for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers.(Ps. 24:1f.)

Think of it. Behind the world -- our world, the world in which you and I are existing right now -- behind this world dwells the living God! Yes, even behind the endless reaches of space. God is there. He is behind the largest star and the smallest particle. He is behind the tree on the mountain-side, the wheel on the road. God is even behind the dishes and silverware on your dinner table. There is no place in the world where God is not present. He holds the universe in the palm of His hand. His mighty arm supports all things.

But there is a contradiction involved in all this. Even though God is behind the world, even though He is in all places -- space included -- He is never seen by us. Does this surprise you? It surprises me. God is everywhere caring for the world, the whole earth sings of His Glory, the lilies of the field and the birds of the sky praise His Name -- yet you and I cannot see Him. It is as if we have been forced to wear blindfolds. We do not see God's glory. We do not see his mighty arm. God the Father is there, behind the world, and yet we must still ask, "Where is God?"

I will let you in on a little secret. Our blindfolds are not of God's making, but ours. We have fastened them securely in place. We are responsible for our lack of vision. God created us to lead God-dependent human lives in His world. We daily decide to lead man-dependent inhuman lives in what we like to think is our world. God gave us the land to cultivate; we mutilate it. We took ore from the ground and forged it into steel for weapons long before we made plowshares. The very atoms with which God builds life, we used to unleash death.

Our refusal to be dependent on God and our misuse of His Creation has become a vicious habit which has led us into an impenetrable darkness. This darkness is sin -- in all its naked wickedness. Each one of us is an Adam. By reason of our rebellion against God the Father we have been thrust out of the Garden. Look around you. Is this paradise we live in? Of course it is not. Instead of seeing God all around us we walk alone in darkness, a self-imposed darkness which seems to have no hint of light. Despite momentary pleasures, the underlying reality of the world which we see is hard work, puzzled faces, and painful silences.

> The eyes are not here
> There are no eyes here
> In this valley of dying stars
> This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

All this is as it is, not because God is dead as Nietzsche claimed. No. God is the living God. He is here. He is caring for His creatures. He is the loving Father who is behind the world. But we have raised the flag of rebellion against our Father. You and I. We have "sinned in thought, word, and deed." And for this reason the God who is behind the world is not visible to us. We are alone. We are in darkness.

II.

I think that if you will probe behind the six-year-old's question about God's whereabouts, you will find more than idle curiosity. This is the collective cry of mankind! Where is God? Are we alone? Is it true as someone has said that we are at best lonely little specks of dust in a meaningless universe?

One thing is certain. Sin has so invaded our lives that, if we look for God the Father behind the world, we will not find Him. Rather we must look for God at that place where He has looked for us. "I am the light of the world;" said Christ, "he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."(Jn. 8:12) If we are to find where God is, we must look to His light, the light which "shines in darkness."(Jn. 1:5)

God is not only the Father, cut off from us by our own rebellion, but God is also the Son. The loving Father did not leave us alone in the darkness of our sin as we deserved. "God so loved the world that He gave his only Son..."(Jn. 3:16) God is not only behind the world. God is <u>in Christ</u>. In Christ we are given light and life.

Several months ago, a story of near tragedy came out of West Virginia, a story which sounds familiar. It seems that an underground lake had suddenly broken through into a mine shaft. Fortunately the swirling waters did not immediately fill the whole mine. They did block off all exits and the miner's supply of light and air. The collapse was so sudden that it took some time before heavy equipment could be rushed in. The trapped miners could only stay where they were and wait. Death was beginning to seep up around their ankles. They were utterly alone in the dark. It was only when help came from the outside that they could be rescued.

God carried out much the same kind of rescuing action in Jesus Christ. Men had been cut off from true life — not by a natural calamity but by their own rebellion. They were in darkness, alone, without light. Death was beginning to touch their lives. It appeared that all was lost -- even God. But then out of His infinite love for the world, God Himself broke through the powers that held man in darkness. God the Son rescued men from their hopeless isolation.

So we must turn to Jesus Christ and to Him alone if we are to know where God is. Apart from Christ we are in darkness, we are alone. But in Him we have life and have it abundantly. Jesus was much more than a nice man who was kind to little children. He <u>was</u> that, the kindness He lived this world had never seen. But if He had been <u>only</u> a nice man, we would still be trapped in the cave-in of our sin. We would still be living in darkness. But "God was in Christ..."(II Cor. 5:19) The same God who is behind the world. He so loved the world that He took on flesh, real flesh, to rescue us.

III.

I wonder whether this good news about Jesus Christ is real for you? It is an ever-present temptation to assume that Jesus Christ is real for everyone else, but not for us. There is something about our routine day to day living which makes this almost inevitable. We tend to be confused by ordinariness.

One of the striking features of W.H. Auden's "For the Time Being," is that this very problem is depicted in dramatic terms. The whole play deals with the birth of Christ, the True Light come into the world. It describes vividly the reactions of the several participants in the Christmas story. Just when you expect to turn the page to find Angels singing praises to the Son of God and the world coming to kneel at His feet -- just then, everything in the world becomes almost embarrassingly ordinary and routine. The world goes on as before, even though the Christ has come. Mothers change diapers, children play in the streets, fathers converse at the village gate. "But the Christ has come," you find yourself protesting, "there must be a difference!" But evidently there is no difference. The play ends on a note of drab ordinariness.

So God has come into the world in the person of His only-begotten Son! So God has rescued men from darkness! These words of despair might very well be your own. Like Auden's play, the good news of God's Son may not make the slightest difference so far as you are concerned. So you ask from the depths of your being, "How is the good news of Christ to become <u>my</u> good news?"

The answer is clear and simple. Not by any striving on your part. Not by any words from my mouth. But only by God's Spirit. It is God the Spirit who brings you the life and light which is in Jesus Christ. You do not find life and light by yourself. God the Spirit comes to you and helps you to make

sense out of this puzzling world, this world of drab ordinariness.

Without God the Spirit Jesus Christ would be, as we say, "back there in Bible times." Many of us, I am afraid, forget about God's Spirit. This tragic forgetfulness can only mean that Jesus Christ will be "back there" and that God will not be real for us. Have you ever paid close attention to our Sunday School pictures? Jesus is almost always depicted wearing a beard and dressed in flowing robes. What other conclusion can you draw than that Jesus Christ was real only for men of Bible times? Our Sunday School pictures have almost unanimously overlooked the Third Person of the Trinity! And I think that it is a temptation for us to do so too.

Let us be honest. If God is not alive today, acting here and now in our lives, we had better fold up our hymnals and go home! Christianity is not the society for revering Bible times, it is the collective acknowledgment that God is active today, here and now, even as He was active in the past. God "has put his seal upon us," as St. Paul says. God "has given us his Spirit in our hearts as a (living) guarantee."(II Cor. 1:22) A living guarantee, given to each believer! To you! That most astounding of pronouns. God the Spirit brings Jesus Christ, the resurrected Lord, to you. Not just someone else, but you. By His Spirit God carries eternal light to each one of us in Jesus Christ.

Notice that the word is "Spirit," not "spiritual." By lengthening the word we fall into a modern heresy which has crept in the back door of many of our Churches. God is not necessarily with people in spiritual things! Spiritual things, like our human attempts at piety, by no means have a direct line to heaven. Indeed spiritual things sometimes even serve as a religious blindfold which cuts us off from the light in Christ! It is possible to be so concerned with spiritual principles, spiritual actions, or spiritual thoughts, that you miss the living God. The Bible knows nothing of the spiritual as we understand it. The Bible speaks in terms of God's Spirit, a real and personal reality who visits men in all kinds of circumstances, in battle, in dreams, in daily work.

So we must be on our guard against attempting to isolate God's Spirit to those things which we consider spiritual. The truth of the matter is that God's Spirit comes to us throughout our whole existence. Auden's play was not altogether wrong. There is an ordinariness about all of our lives even though Christ has come. But it is precisely in this ordinariness that God the Spirit comes to us. The Spirit brings you life in Jesus Christ wherever you may find yourself: at home, at work, at school, or in church. The domain of God's Spirit is your daily history, yes, even what you might consider to be your drab daily history. God the Spirit works to make your daily history part of His saving history.

Kierkegaard tells a story. Suppose you have gone to a play. You are sitting comfortably in your seat along with many other onlookers. You are enthralled by the action on the stage. In a very real way you live your way into the lives of the characters in the play. But then suddenly the action comes to an unexpected halt. The director of the play emerges on stage and the house-lights go on. To your astonishment he points at you and you hear him say, "I want you up here. You are to have a part."

This is precisely the action of God the Spirit. Even though God is behind the world; even though He has sent His only Son into the world — you still remain a spectator. But God does not want that. He loves you too much to have you remain in the darkness as an onlooker. He points to you. He puts

His seal on you. He gives you a living guarantee in His Spirit. He makes your daily history part of His saving history. You are called to act on the stage. There in His saving history God is with you. There it is that He gives you life in Jesus Christ. The Light is abundant. You know where God is.

This week when you pick up a newspaper and read about the most recent rocket shot into space, it is altogether possible that a question will come to your mind. From the depths of your being you may ask, "Where is God?" This is a very old question which has taken on monumental proportions in our time. It is not a childish question, it is buried deep in the hearts of all of us.

If the question is still in your mind when you come to church next Sunday, it will be well for you to listen carefully to the words which open the Service. "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Here is the answer to your question.