FROM SCIENCE TO RELIGION

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
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"And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses."(Exodus 14:31)

The experience which this text represents is to be contrasted to our typical twentieth century experience. I suppose our modern sensibility is nowhere better expressed in this regard than in the play by Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot. At one point, for example, Vladimir remarks, "What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this," he explains, "that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for God to come -- ...Or for night to fall. We have kept our appointment." And, as you know, God, or Godot, doesn't keep his appointment, according to the play.

I think you will agree that you and I ought to take Vladimir seriously. For, we know that as twentieth century men and women Vladimir speaks for each of us, in one way or another, at one level or another. As modern men and women, we are waiting for Godot. We don't take him for granted, as part of our daily experience, anymore. We live in a post-religious era. On the other hand, I think you will also agree that we should be honest about Vladimir, too. I mean, we should take him no more seriously than he deserves to be taken. And that is what our text helps us to do.

From the perspective of our text, we see Vladimir as the observer par excellence. He is convinced that he has found the right place and he is wathcing and waiting. From his chosen place, we may ask, what would Vladimir be able to see or hear of God, if indeed God did show his face or speak his piece? Presumably Vladimir, with his stance of observation and his predilection that there is no ultimate meaning, that night is about to fall, -- presumably Vladimir is prepared to witness a miracle. In the words of Auden:

> The Pilgrim Way has led to the Abyss.
> We who must die demand a miracle. . . . .
> Nothing can save us that is possible:
> We who must die demand a miracle.

Modern sensibility demands an astounding, supernatural fact, or it will not see God. I suppose that Vladimir would be moved if he saw a wall of water on the right and a wall of water on the left, and an overpowered army, like that of ancient Israel, supernaturally passing between the two walls, escaping certain destruction at the hands of the closely pursuing enemy forces. Something like that. The observer demands an identifiable Divine interruption of the normal course of human experience if he is to believe.

But as such diverse spirits as David Hume and Ralph Waldo Emerson have pointed out, miracles don't happen anymore. Miracles happened once-upon-a-time perhaps; they don't happen today. Lest there be any doubt we can recall the sign one of the French kings put on a certain cemetery, -- the performance of miracles is no longer allowed. That sign signaled the beginning of our modern era.

It has, of course, been an immensely successful era. From Newton to Einstein, from natural selection to DNA. From coal to atomic power, from sidewheeling steamboat to supersonic transport. An immensely successful era. All brought about, it seems, by the careful use of observation, by assuming the stance of one who examines experience from a stance of detachment. Which, as you immediately see, is the

very stance of Vladimir. You don't jump to conclusions about anything. You wait to observe the results. As a result, you discover DNA and cover over God, or so it seems. Obviously DNA can be identified and a fantastic Divine interruption of human experience cannot. You can observe the one and not the other. So, as a friend said the other day, you embrace the new trinity: DNA, RNA, and protein.

Now obviously, no one with any sense is going to ask that we give up this new trinity in order to get back to the old one. But I think we are permitted to comment, even obligated to comment, that the successful scientific observer is not only an observer. Any scientist worth his salt will tell you so. The scientific enterprise is predicated on hunches and guesses. The scientific enterprise is built upon what we can call a basal wonder. The scientist, in this sense, proceeds as much by intuition and guesswork as he does by observation. From the far-reaching intuition of an Einstein, that God doesn't play dice with the universe, to the more mundane intuition of the graduate student that such and such an itsy-bitsy experimental project might work out.

Then there is the spontaneity and unpredictability of the natural world itself. Nature constantly seems to be producing the new and the unexpected. Mendalejev's periodic table enabled all the chemical properties of radium, including its atomic weight, to be <u>forecast</u> -- <u>except</u> its one striking characteristic, unknown up to that point, its radioactivity. That came as a surprise.

So wonder, hunch, intuition, <u>and</u> surprise are of the essence of the scientific enterprise. No less than detached, disciplined observation. Another way of saying this, it seems to me, is that the basic research of science is a mixture of poetry and prose. The creative observer is part poet. Which already is to introduce us to the perspective of our text, and its apperception of Israel's crossing of the waters, escaping from the Egyptians.

But before we go to that point, to that place, we will be well instructed to take a slight detour. Into the land of poetry. We are already somewhat into it, as a matter of fact, inspfar as we understand creative scientific observation. But let us go further. For, perhaps more than we know, poetry is the land in which we moderns must sojourn, if we are to enter anew into the land of religion, as many today seem to want to do.

The best thing that could happen in this respect, it would seem, would be if that staunch observer Vladimir could develop a sense of humor. Let him be told about the distinction between prose and poetry, and then hopefully he would say with the character in the Moliere play: "For more than 40 years I have been speaking prose without knowing it!" Vladimir, basically, is a terribly prosaic fellow. So in his own way was David Hume and in his way Ralph Waldo Emerson, notwithstanding the latter's academic poetry.

We can turn here, profitably, to Walt Whitman. Who, as you know, was much more than an observer of nature. Listen to him embrace the world in his intuition:

To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle.

The poet sees through the simple observed phenomenon. He sees around it and above it and beneath it. Dare we say, -- he sees it as it is?

Listen to Wallace Stevens, who talks about a tree. And remember: Vladimir had a tree with him on his stage in his place. But he was too prosaic to see it, really. This is Stevens, then, telling about a man who, in the blaze of summer, turned his head to see a single spruce tree, and

suddenly,
The tree stood dazzling in the air
And blue broke on him from the sun,
A bullioned blue, a blue abulge,
Like daylight, with time's bellishings,
And sensuous summer stood full-height.

Stevens sees the glory of the individual tree. And in that wonder he sees more than the tree. The tree is a Divine creation.

In this sensibility he's not alone. I mean, as far as the theological tradition is concerned. Let me cite Luther again, so that we sometimes prosaic Protestants can realize the poetic blood that's latent in our veins. At one point Luther remarks: if you would know the inner workings of a grain of wheat, you would die of wonder! He says that God works wonders in a grain of wheat, even greater wonders than he works in the Sacrament of the Altar. That is a thought to ponder. Then Luther goes on to refer to the whole world, all of heaven and earth, as the "mask of God." He easily could have said with Whitman, To me every hour of thelight and dark is a miracle,/ Every cubic inch of space is a miracle.

Then the Psalmist. "O Lord my God, thou art very great! Thou art clothed with honor and majesty, who coverest thyself with light as with a garment, who hast stretched out the heavens like a tent, ...who makest the clouds thy chariot, who rides on the wings of the wind, who makest the winds thy messengers, fire and flame thy ministers."(Ps. 104: 1-4) Again: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.... In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes froth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man runs its course with joy."(Ps. 19:1-5)

So when you leave the land of prosaic observation for a moment, and enter the land of poetry, you can see <u>natural miracles worked by God</u>, here and there and everywhere. And you don't have to go that far. Just look at a snowflake next time it snows; or even better, truly see the face of a friend across the table. Personally, with Stevens I would suggest that you also look at a spruce tree. This is the land of poetry, the land where natural miracles abound.

But this is not yet fully the land of religion, at least biblical religion. Biblical relgion means, in brief, thatthe <u>poet listens to Moses</u>. Biblical relgion means that the poet enters into a specific tradition of a specific people and sees with the eyes of that tradition and that people as with his own.

Moses tells of the God who not only works everywhere in wondrous ways, -- that is mostly presupposed, -- but the God who works here and now in a wondrous way for a specific reason. The God who covers himself with light and who upholds the primeval waters, here and now brings this people through these waters in order to initiate his purpose of bringing new life to all men everywhere. The God who gives wonder everywhere has here begun to give that self-transforming vitality which Vladimir, who knows he must die and that night is about to fall, needs now.

That's what the Exodus is all about. The Hollywood interest in the wall of waters on left and right is peripheral. As you know indeed, there are three accounts of the crossing of the waters woven into the material that precedes our text. The last, written some 500 years after the event, makes the waters a wall on the right and on the left. An earlier tradition knows nothing of this, but does depict Moses as using some kind of magic wand to wave over the waters. The earliest tradition knows neither the wall of waters nor the wand, but looks at

the event as a natural occurence, as we would call it. "Natural," however, in the energized sense of Whitman and Stevens and Luther and the Psalmist: "And the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters divided." (Ex. 14:21)

But what is crucial here is not so much the question whether the waters were a wall, whether Moses used a wand, or whether the wind did it all -- although it would seem that the last, that is, the earliest account, is by far the most probable. What really is decisive as far as the text is concerned is not the details of the crossing, but the Divine power permeating the event and the Divine purpose published in the Mosaic interpretation.

I venture to summarize that Mosaic interpretation this way: The God who works powerfully everywhere, who is the ultimate vitality in the light and in the primeval waters, is the God who brought us through that crisis and who will bring us through again, and again. We were destined for death, now we have received life. We were trapped in the crisis, but now we have a new beginning. Later, the great prophet of the Exile, Deutero-Isaiah, would return to the theme of the Exodus: and see God as bringing his people from captivity, through the desert, in to a promised land, -- and see God as planting trees in the wilderness, as he once planted trees in the Garden, making the wilderness blossom. Even much later the poet of the Book of Revelation would dream of an Exodus for the whole world, of a new heaven and a new earth; there he saw a "river of the water of life" flowing through the new world, "also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." (Rev. 22:1f.) The original purpose of God, initiated in the first Exodus, the universal gift of new life, will have been fulfilled.

So we are dreaming dreams in the land of biblical religion. We are seeing with the eyes of a specific tradition of a specific people. But notice, at the same time we remain in the land of poetry. The two belong together. And I would also like to think that we remain, too, in the land of observation. For it's clear to me that the specific vision of biblical relgion and the general vision of poetic intuition do not make us forsake the precise task of scientific observation.

But that's another sermon. I just wanted to say today that we ought to look, -- truly look, -- at the tree on our stage. Wonder at its glory. And then maybe come to see also the Tree of Life planted anew in our midst by God for you and for me and for all the world.