THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE GOD OF GLORY

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
The Festival of the Holy Trinity
June 5, 1966

"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."(Romans 11:33, 36)

As many of you are aware, we gave the Death of God Theologians a long and careful hearing at this Church last Sunday. The Adult Class discussed them at length in the morning. The students discussed them at even greater length in the evening.

Well, by design or by chance, the following day I left the Death of God Theologians behind and took some inspiration from a favorite theologian of mine, Herman Melville. I went out to the ocean, -- to savor its air, to contemplate its majesty, to find some relief from a busy world.

I guess this is just about the place we are in the Church Year. We have followed the message of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. We have come a long way. The same is true for the academic year. Many junctures have been crossed by this Sunday.

So today, fittingly, on Trinity Sunday, we are placed squarely before the ocean-like majesty and wonder of God himself. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"

We are fortunate the Church Year brings this Pauline text to our attention, I think, because this dimension of awe and wonder before the majesty of God has somewhat fallen from sight for many of us. Perhaps this is what the Death of God Theologians are really saying to us.

Consider how domesticated our God is. With the rise of the natural sciences, the Church tended more and more to restrict the sphere of God's activity and glory to the context of human history. John Calvin had said that the whole cosmos is a theatre of God's glory, but the Church came more and more to see the works of God only within the affairs of men.

But then in the wake of such events as two world wars, concentration camps, and thermo-nuclear bombs, the Church tended more and more to restrict the sphere of God's activity and glory to the Church itself, the community of God's Word and Sacraments. Believers no longer looked for God's hand in the events of mundane history: rather they turned to a special sacred sphere.

Yet that was only a temporary solution. For it soon became apparent that the Church, especially in its institutional functioning,

is very much a part of mundane history and very much subject to typical human institutional errors and stupidities.

So the emphasis has come to rest more and more on the faith of the faith of the individual. For apparently here, if nowhere else, is a sacrosanct area. Here is where God can be found, if anywhere: in the human mind and heart and soul. But, it turns out, the faith of the individual believer is a pretty feeble candle in the vast quasi-darkness of a thoroughly secular world. Ask just about any freshman how long an isolated individualistic faith holds up in the dormatory. At Harvard, for example, I suspect it is about one week, maybe two weeks. The little candle of isolated, individualistic personal faith is easily snuffed out, or it easily falls from sight altogether.

So stage by stage the sphere of God's dominion, -- as that dominion has been proclaimed by the Church, -- has shriveled. From the whole universe to human history on this planet, from human history to the Church, from the Church to the individual heart and soul.

As a result we have a God for whom great things are claimed, as in the past, but who actually is seen to do little more than warm the individual human heart. God has become domesticated. He has become a household god, one of the penates whom pious Aeneas and men throughout the ages have turned to for consolation from time to time. Or to say this in more contemporary language, God has become the man upstairs.

This god, of course, does not really do anything, -- except, significantly, say Yes to actions man has already undertaken.

If you read Xenephon's account of Cyrus's persian expedition, you will notice how Cyrus's custom was to check in with the soothsayers just before he went into battle. You know, a little nod to the gods. Actually, as any reader can tell, the only thing which would have turned Cyrus back from his expedition would have been a superior army. But he apparently felt more comfortable to have the omens on his side.

Likewise in our day, our domesticated god is invoked to bless just about every enterprise we undertake, from football games to Vietnam, from split level houses to segregated cemeteries, from June exams to European travel.

This, I suppose, is what finally must become of the domesticated god, of the god whose sphere of dominion has been restricted to the human heart. Such a god finally can only say Yes, or a feeble No, to human enterprises already underway. The old man upstairs really does not have much to say about the young, vital, quickly moving world outside the house.

No wonder people are reading the Death of God Theologinas with such zeal today! Of course the old man upstairs is dead! Why has it taken us so long to realize that?! Why have we held on to our household god?! Perhaps we have had our noses too much to the grindstone and our eyes too little on the signs of the times.

-3-

Our domesticated god is dead. He died when Einstein began to write. He died in the trenches of 1914. He died in Buchenwald and Hiroshima. He died in the mass slaughter on our affluent highways this past weekend. He died in the disintegration of our families, yesterday and today. It is only a matter of time until everyone discovers that the man upstairs is gone.

But it is another story, I submit, for the God of glory proclaimed by biblical faith. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how insrutable are his ways!"

This is not the little household god to whom pious men have gone from time immemorial to gain comfort and blessing for their schemes. This is the infinite ocean-like God upon whom and in whom this little ship-like universe has its being. This is the God of power and might who could swallow up this cosmos with one storm of wrath.

Of course this is figurative talk: an "infinite ocean-like God" and a "limited ship-like universe." But why should we not use similie or metaphor when we are trying to lay hold of a reality which infinitely transcends our finite world?

The language of biblical faith is metaphorical through and through, self-consciously metaphorical. This, I think, is because biblical faith is in many respects a childlike apperception of reality. It flows with imagination.

Nikos Kazantzakis has expressed the point well, I think, in his book Report to Greco. He writes: "When I wish to speak of the sea, woman, or God in my writing, I gaze down into my breast and listen carefully to what the child within me says. He dictates to me; and if it sometimes happens that I come close to these great forces of sea, woman, and God, approach them by means of words and depict them, I owe it to the child who still lives within me. I become a child again to enable myself to view the world always for the first time, with virgin eyes."

But, I emphasize, the metaphorical, childlike character of the biblical perception of reality does not mean that it has no intellectual weight. On the contrary, it is heavy with intellectual implications. The physicist, William Pollard, has drawn out some of these implications in his book Chance and Providence. Pollard's thesis is that God is the ultimate mover throughout the all-encompassing sub-atomic world. In a similar way, Teilard de Chardin has depicted the whole story of evolution as a Divinely energized process.

See how congenial such speculations are to biblical faith. St. Paul, in our text, sees the whole universe as flowing from God, being upheld by him, and moving toward him. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

Yet as St. Paul himself emphasizes, such speculations and

-4-

childlike visions, enticing as they may be, are always inadequate. They always fall short of the mark. The judgments of the God of glory are unsearchable and his ways are inscrutable. You and I, in other words, are never able to jump out of our finite skin. We are never able to see the works of God except with our limited human perception.

There is an old Latin saying that all things come to rest in mystery. That I guess is a good reflection of our text. We mortals cannot probe unaided the depths and breadth of the ocean. We finally can only contemplate it and wonder at it.

Is it not interesting that the theologian who is perhaps the greatest speculative mind the Church has ever produced, Thomas Aquinas, broke off his monumental Summa Theologica before it was finished in order to devote himself to prayer and contemplation? Is it not interesting that St. Augustine, who wrote a long and to this day influential treatise on the Trinity, remarked that he wrote of the Trinity only in order not to say nothing? All things come to rest in mystery.

On the other hand, St. Thomas, St. Augustine, and St. Paul himself were all convinced that we men have been given knowledge and wisdom of ultimate reality sufficient for our finite livesand purposes, sufficient for authentic human life. And they saw this knowledge and wisdom as being concretely and daily mediated to us.

This past Monday the sun was shining on the ocean. And that light made all the difference. It made the whole seascape dance with color and life. It made it possible for the onlooker to sense deeply the majesty of the ocean.

Biblical faith and the traditional faith of the Church has always viewed the glory and mystery of God with some such imagry in mind, some such idea of illumination and mediation of light.

That source of light is seen finally to come to consummation in the One who is therefore called the Mediator: the man Jesus. So the letter to the Hebrews says of Christ: "He reflects the glory of God."

In other words, from a biblical perspective the glory and the majesty of God have been concretely embodied and reflected in our midst. They have shone and continue to shine down on our human, finite world. The glory of God shines forth from the face of Christ, enabling all men thereafter to catch glimpses of a transcendent majesty which fills heaven and earth. Yet biblical faith is even more concrete.

When the sun is rising or setting, its rays slide across the waters and focus directly on you. I suppose that is one reason why people like to watch the sun rise or set from a ship. The sun shines everywhere, but you see its rays coming in power right to you. So biblical faith is highly specific: not only does it see the historical Christ as the Mediator for all men, but it sees this same Christ, as our Resurrected Lord, shining directly to us in the

-5-
power of his Spirit.

As we gather together here on the ship of life, he shines on us and illuminates our lives. ...He helps us to see.

So let us read the Death of God Theologians. Their criticism is long overdue. But let us go to the ocean too, and wonder at the majesty and glory we see. And let us give thanks for the glorious sun, which makes all the difference, which shines on us and allows us to see the deep places in wonder and awe.

> "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."