

IN THE BEGINNING GOD

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Deut.6:4-7

It hardly seems possible we are on the threshold of another year, but time has a way of marching on and there is precious little we can do to hold it back.

I read the other day about a census taker who was filling out the usual forms. When he came to the question of age, the woman he was interviewing refused to answer directly. But she did say she was as old as the folks next door. It so happened their name was Hill. So the census taker simply wrote, "Mrs. X is as old as the Hills."

Like it or not, time marches on!

A couple of weeks ago, I chanced to see the last ten minutes of a football game on TV. I hate to admit it, but apart from two of our Morgan Park High School games, I haven't seen a football game all season. To an avid football fan like myself, that's a terrible admission of failure. I hope to rectify that today when the Bears take on the Giants in New York, and on Tuesday when Oregon State cleans Iowa's plow in the Rose Bowl!

At any rate, I did chance to see the last ten minutes of this football game. It was very close and all eyes were divided between the play on the field and the clock which dominated the scoreboard at the end of the stadium. I was pulling for the underdog, who needed to score once more to win. MY, how the seconds flew by as they tried valiantly to push that ball across the goal line.

Unfortunately, they didn't make it. And in the post-game wrap-up, the announcer pointed out several occasions during the game when they might have won if they could have capitalized upon a particular break. But, unlike those last fleeting seconds which flew so fast, those earlier opportunities were gone, never to return.

Time marches on and there is precious little we can do to hold it back or to change the events

which transpired within any block of it.

Wilbur Poor, one of our fine members with a distinct flair for writing, gave me a poem some months ago which he had penned.

“How oft have I thought in the evening
As the shades of night steal on
That the day that had just been finished
Is a day that is past and gone.

“A day that is past and gone, perhaps
Was my day to mold as I would.
Is it molded well? Am I proud of its shape?
Have I shaped it as well as I should?

“But a day does not pass or go away
Forever it stays in its place.
We pass on, but the record remains
Which nothing can erase.”

Omar Khayam said much the same thing in a different way when, in the Rubaiyat he wrote:

“The moving finger writes and having writ,
moves on.
Nor all your piety, not wit shall lure it back
to cancel half a line.
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it.”

I got to thinking about all this the other day when I came across a sentence by Charles Lamb:

“No man ever yet regarded the first of January with indifference.”

It’s pretty hard to figure out just why that should be. For “calendars and clocks are manmade

contrivances, not divine creations.” Nothing ever happens between December 31st and January 1st to change the natural laws by which we live. As a matter of fact, New Year’s has no religious significance whatsoever. It is neither a divinely appointed period of life nor a Christian festival. And yet, in a way which none of us can deny, Charles Lamb was right:

“No man ever yet greeted the first of January with indifference.”

We are more than casually concerned about the fact that within a few hours, 1956 will end and 1957 will begin.

Perhaps it’s because we have an uneasy feeling we have been here before. We look back upon the departing year and remember that just 12 months ago we stood on similar ground...motivated by similar yearnings...and made certain vows which we must now confess we have not kept. And try as hard as we may, we cannot completely stifle our regret over the past.

We remember that last year and the year before, and the year before that, and for as many years as we can remember, we stood with shining eyes, looking with cheerful optimism at the days ahead...only to look back 12 months later with troubled hearts...because we know we have not been true to our high resolves. We sense that something is wrong. Surely it is not God’s will that we should be eternally gazing eagerly toward spiritual heights we have no hope of reaching.

As we pause to think about it, we begin to see our problem is not *what* to do. We know that. The inner light which shines within all hearts has made it perfectly clear what areas of our life could stand correcting for the better.

No, our problem is not what to do but how to do it. Somewhere along the line, between the moment of high resolve and the hour of mourning in regret, our resources ran dry. The artillery with which we had hoped to hit a star did not prove heavy enough to reach so remote a target.

I think that accounts for the very real concern with which we always approach this season of the year. As Chris H. Tice, a retired Methodist minister from England, writes

“No man who thinks frankly and courageously about life and its possibilities can deny a feeling of inadequacy, if not helplessness. That sense of inadequacy is both a humiliation and a stimulus. It is humiliating to a man to have to confess that he has neither the wisdom or strength for life in his world, but it is also a stimulus because it is out of that inadequacy...that helplessness...that he cries to God.”

And I would like to suggest this morning that our greatest need in 1957 is not for more or better resolutions...but for an inward certainty of God.

No other resource is needed. No other resource will do. For when faith in God ceases to be an experimental phrase and becomes an exhilarating fact, then we can face the future knowing that there is one Source of help to which we will never turn in vain. And thus my title,

In The Beginning God.

A little five year old girl was lying on the living room floor working feverishly with paper and crayon. Her Mother watched her for a moment and said: “Mary, what are you doing?” The little girl answered: “Mommy, I’m drawing God.” The mother smiled and replied: “But Mary, you can’t do that. No one knows how God looks.” The girl sat up straight and, with a look of triumph in her face, said: “They will now.”

I suppose every parent here this morning has been stumped by the question, “Mommy, or Daddy, where is God? Who is He? What is He like?” Don’t feel inferior if you don’t have a ready answer. Those are profound questions which even the wisest have never answered.

A few months ago Ginny Anderson was talking to her son, David. In the course of their chat she said: “David, who is Jesus?” David said: “Oh, He’s God’s Son. You know, like Anderson.” Well, down through the centuries, people have had their ideas of God.

“He is like the sun,” said the ancients, “the giver of light and life, powerful and splendid.”

“He is like the fire,” said others, “warming, purging, destroying.” “No,” said their friends, “God is like the mountains. Majestic, aloof, unchanging and unchangeable.” And so they worshiped the sun, the fire, the mountains. The elements of nature.

If you turn to the sages of the ages, the great philosophers of today and yesterday, you will find their speculations:

“God is force, He is nature;
He is everywhere, He is nowhere:
He is powerful, He is weak;
He is selfish, He is sacrificing;
He is kind, He is cruel;
He is like good men, He is like bad men.”

Even today in this age of enlightenment, it is amazing the ideas of God which men conjure up in their minds.

Some see Him as “A terrible being who shoots the blinding darts of a zigzag lightening and sends the thunder crashing across the sky.”

To others, He is “The policeman of the world. The supreme spy, whose eye is everywhere at once, looking, prying, searching out the naughty things that people do.”

Still others see Him as “An exacting school master who hands out a book of rules and stands by with a stick to see that they are obeyed.”

And *all* of these speculations are wrong.

One of the great experiences of my life was to listen to Dr. Clarence Cranford, pastor of the great

Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., when, in his sermon at the Minneapolis convention, he laid before us the great sweep of the bible as it unveiled the glory and majesty of God.

“Cranny” took us back to the beginning when men thought there were many gods and the gods were whimsical so that religion consisted pretty much in trying to appease the gods.

And then he led us into the Old Testament and showed how out of its wondering and suffering a nation rose to say that there is one God and He is not whimsical, He is dependable.

Abraham asked:

“Shall not the judge of the nations do right?”

And his words were an affirmation of faith as well as a question.

But dependable in what way? Amos said,

“I know, we can depend on His justice. His justice is as stern as the law of the desert in which I keep my sheep. God is a plumb line. Whatever is not true to that plumb line will eventually topple over.”

Hosea said:

“Yes, that’s true. But God is more than justice. Even after she had proven untrue to my love, and was about to be sold as a slave, I loved Gomar so much that I bought her back. God is greater than I. So He loves Israel, if Israel will repent.”

Jonah said:

“Yes, but He loves more than Israel. He told me to go to Nineveh and preach, but I did not want to go to Nineveh. The Ninevites were our enemies. So I went to Joppa and bought a ticket to Tarshish, which is as far in the other direction as I could go. But one cannot run away from God. God turned me around and I went

back to Nineveh and preached and a revival broke out. One day as I examined a gourd destroyed by worms, God's truth flashed in on me. If I could be concerned about a gourd vine, God could be concerned about something infinitely more precious...the souls of the Ninevites."

And then Jeremiah tried to draw a picture of God's love. He said it was like a potter, patiently making the marred vessel.

Isaiah went a step further. He drew a better picture. A picture of a suffering servant. But still, people could not understand. A God of vengeance...they could understand that. A God of seven thunders...that appealed to them. But a God who was willing to be afflicted for their transgressions was beyond them. And then one day the picture took on flesh and people did not have to ask any more what the love of God is like. They saw it revealed in a life. On a cross.

Someone has said we cannot look at the sublime moment on the cross when Jesus prayed for His enemies, without realizing the Universe that could produce such a life and such a moment has, at its heart, an inexhaustible well of forgiveness.

Ever since then, when men have asked the question, "What is God like?", we have pointed to Jesus Christ and answered, "God is like this." For in the majestic language of Paul:

"God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ...for in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily...who is the image of the invisible God" (II Cor. 4:6; Col. 2:9; 1:15).

You ask, "But how can I know that I can find God in Christ?" In the final analysis, there is only one way. And that is by personal experience through what physicists would call "an operational viewpoint."

Let me see if I can show you what that means. One of the laws of physics is that a body falls with an accelerated motion. That is, it's speed of fall in free space increases. Now, a text book can tell you that. But you will not have any real understanding of this phenomenon until you go through the actual operation of measuring how this speed of fall increases. And then, when you have gone through the operation of examining this particular law of physics in action, then you achieve what physicists call "an operational viewpoint". That is, your viewpoint is conditioned by the "operation" or "experience" you have had with this law. And, as you have more of these experiences, your knowledge of the subject grows.

Then the question becomes: "How do you know that your observations are correct?" Perhaps you are having hallucinations. After all, what is truth? Well, the physicist proves his experience by comparing it with the experiences of others who have gone through similar operations. If they have arrived at the same conclusion...if hundreds, yea millions, confirm his findings...then he begins to believe he has arrived at one small item of truth.

Now, it is not too different in the realm of the spirit. As a matter of fact, the bible is consistently challenging men to experiment with God.

Malachi 3:10 "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse...*and prove Me now*, sayeth the Lord of hosts"...

I John 4:11 "Beloved, do not believe every spirit but *test the spirits* to see whether they are of God."

And the apostle Paul exhorts the Ephesians to "measure the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God." Even though, as he hastens to add, it "surpasses knowledge."

Well, you see there are some things we will never know about God until that moment when we meet Him face to face. Let's not worry about that. Absolute 0 on the scale of temperatures has never been reached and there is a law of thermal-dynamics which seems to say it never will be

reached. Yet people keep on trying. And, as a result, they learn something more about an unexplored region.

That's why Jesus said: "Ask and it shall be given you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you."

Nothing will happen in your life...God will never become a reality to you...and the unlimited resources of the Eternal will never be fully appropriated until you enter upon "an operation procedure"...until you gain "an operational viewpoint".

You must put God to an experimental test. You must subject Christ to the only angle which can adequately measure His capacity to meet your needs: the try-angle. You must *try* Him. You must *experience* Him. And then you must corroborate that experience by comparing it with the experiences of other intrepid pioneers of the spirit.

And the corroborative evidence concerning Christ is voluminous. Over 500 million living Christians can testify to the fact that Jesus is more than a figure from history. They can confirm the experience of your own soul. That is one of the values of sharing your Christian experience. Not only does it strengthen others, it strengthens you. And you are bound more firmly to your faith by the tie of common experience...the experience of others which corroborates your own.

But remember this: All that God has done for me; all that God has done for the hundreds of people in this room; all that God has done for the millions of Christians around the world will not do for you. You must experience Christ on your own.

To say Jesus died, is history. To say Jesus dies for me, is faith.

Over two years ago, I mentioned a picture which hangs in one of the art galleries in the city of New York. I have never seen it. If some of you know where it is, please tell me for I would like to see it first hand.

As I understand it, it is a picture of a group of people climbing up a very steep hill. There are rocks and briars along the way to add to the difficulty of the rugged climb. Beyond the summit of the hill, where the people cannot see it, lies the beautiful city of God.

Folks who have seen the picture claim the artist has used every bit of talent at his command to make it the most beautiful painting of heaven on canvas. The question which comes to mind when you think about the picture is, "How do the people know they're going in the right direction to reach the city of God?"

The artist provides the answer. Up in the corner of the painting above the unseen city, he has placed the face of Jesus shining through the clouds. The people know as long as they keep their eyes on Jesus, they are moving in the right direction.

And so, as you face the future--

As you look down the Corridors Of The Days called 1957--

As you remember past resolves that lay shattered along your path like bits of broken rainbow--

As you recall those moments when the spirit was willing but the flesh was weak because you tried to do in the flesh what can only be done by the Spirit--

As you reflect upon what you have been and think about what you might have become--

Remember -- In The Beginning God.

Before you tackle anything else, get straight with Him, make sure of Him, get linked up with the unlimited resources of eternal life. Try Christ, and you will find Him sure. Reach up for the hand which reaches down, and know that a seeking soul and a seeking Savior are never far apart.