

Minor Theophanies

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My topic for this morning concerns theophanies. So that we are all beginning with the same assumptions, let me offer a brief, if not exhaustive definition of that word: A theophany is a visitation of the divine, an intrusion of the sacred into the realm of the ordinary. To use language more acceptable to contemporary secular rationalism, a theophany is a moment of unexpected insight, when the underlying nature of reality is suddenly revealed, and we are able to glimpse existence from a new, unexpected and often re-orienting perspective. A Theophany is the "Aha moment," when what has been staring us in the face all the time moves suddenly into the foreground of our vision field and is fully seen and comprehended for the first time.

There is a fairly substantial literature describing this kind of experience. And interestingly enough, the experience is not confined to religious mystics. Although religious literature is, of course filled with accounts of such experiences, recently we have begun to understand that theophanies--if the term be defined broadly enough--play an important role in the development of insight and understanding in a whole host of situations which on the face of them do not appear to be religious in nature. For example, it is not uncommon for scientists to report that their most revolutionary insights came to them suddenly and as if in an instant--often when they thought they were thinking about something else. Musicians--at least from the time of Mozart--have sometimes reported that entire compositions appeared unexpectedly in their minds, demanding that they be put down on paper. Writers and poets have reported similar experiences. It is as if a power not one's self suddenly takes over the mental process, puts reality together in a new way which transforms understanding and demands expression.

With our penchant for mechanistic explanations of reality, we have developed a new mythology which seeks to describe the process by which these theophanies occur. According to the myth of the bicameral brain, the two hemispheres of the brain have separate and somewhat independent functions, one charged with analysis and sequential, linear, linguistic functions, while the other is much more involved in integrative, contextual processes. While much of our time is devoted to the linear, the sequential, the logical acts of analyzing and measuring and weighing, there are moments when the other half of the brain asserts itself and those are the moments when our fragmented experience with life is put together in a new and creative manner which reorganizes our understanding of existence or of some part of it.

All of this may be true, but it leaves a number of important questions unanswered. Why are we so infrequently aware of the integrative function of the brain asserting itself? Why are we usually surprised when the insight strikes--not realizing that we had even been concerned with the subject matter which comprised that insight? If this is so natural a process, why is it that some of us are conscious of no such experience to which we can point? Having related the experience of the theophany to the structure of the brain, what have we explained? We still do not know why the brain is structured as it is, or why it should function in this peculiar manner? As usual, our commitment to mechanistic explanations leaves much of the experience unexplained.

It is not my purpose this morning, to try to explain the functioning of the human brain, or the source and nature of the experience of theophany, of the intrusion of the sacred into the midst of the mundane. Rather, I would like to share with you some very minor theophanies which I have experienced in recent years. They are minor theophanies in a variety of senses--they resulted in no earth-shaking new theories; none of them is sufficiently significant to warrant an entire sermon; they have nagged at me so insistently that I find that until I have dealt with them, I have difficulty focusing on other, more appropriate and perhaps more interesting sermonic materials. And so, for better or worse, I share with you this morning a couple of minor theophanies which I hope you may find personally insightful and useful.

Let me begin by confessing that for a long time it seemed to me that I was simply incapable of any kind of mystic experience, that for some reason my mind was forever closed to theophanies. Perhaps I had come to that conclusion because of my early religious training. As some of you know, I was reared within the confines of Protestant evangelical fundamentalism. The religion to which I was exposed was both fervent and highly emotional, what a friend has called "hot and holy," with little rational or intellectual content. Among my earliest memories are the portions of the church service which were devoted to "testifying." These were extended periods of time when people in the congregation were invited to witness to the wonderful work of God in their own lives. I remember men and women standing in the midst of the congregation, often with tears streaming down their cheeks, and testifying to the manner in which, amid personal, daily, unremitting trials and tribulations, the Lord Christ would appear to them, offer them solace and support and understanding and so transform their lives that although the trials and tribulations continued, they now were bearable, acceptable, endurable. Scarcely a Sunday evening went by without some such personal witness to theophany, to the intrusion of the sacred into the mundane.

I early became skeptical of these reports. To begin with, no matter how hard I tried, I was never able to summon a similar experience. Secondly, as I grew older, it occurred to me that most of the trials and tribulations which occasioned these experiences were relatively trivial when viewed from the outside. And finally, it occurred to me that if the Lord Christ really were interested in the daily trials of various individuals, he might do something to remove the burdens of those

individuals, rather than simply give them a weekly pep-talk. And so, I was tempted to dismiss these reports--except I could not erase from my memory the genuine conviction which those voices conveyed and the unmistakable tears which coursed down care-worn and wrinkled faces. Something had happened to these people, something had repeatedly happened to these people, something I did not understand, but something real and significant to them. I resigned myself to the possibility that some defect in my make-up had closed off this important dimension of the religious life in my own experience.

Of late, however, I realize that I have had similar experiences from time to time--less dramatic and less profound, perhaps because my need has been less--but similar in nature. I share a couple of them with you, for what they are worth.

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Crossing from Delaware to New Jersey on the ferry, I sat watching the crowds of people moving up and down the deck, find a bench to sit on, chatting together, getting up and moving to the railing to watch the water side by under the keel of the boat. Suddenly I was aware of a cloud of sea gulls following the ferry. I thought that perhaps the turbulence of our wake brought small fish to the surface and that the gulls were engaged in harvesting the opportunity our crossing presented. But as I watched, I could see no gull dip toward the sea in search of a fish. Other people became aware of the gulls and soon were tearing up small bits of bread secured from the ferry's snack bar, tossing them to the birds. The gulls moved in closer and before long, while still in mid-flight, were taking food from the outstretched hands of passengers. After a while the novelty wore off; the passengers expended their food supplies, and ignoring the hovering birds, turned to other occupations. The birds swept around to the other side of the deck seeking new opportunities. After a while, I was aware of a man with a camera, taking pictures of his children, of the approaching shore, of the glint of light on water. Suddenly we were both startled by a raucous cry. Off the railing of the boat a single gull was hanging on crooked wing. The gull had seen the camera. His scream was intended to attract the attention of the photographer, who whirled around, paused for a second, then pointed his camera at the gull. The bird adjusted his flight so as to hang motionless while the photographer adjusted and focused his camera. The moment the click was heard, the bird flew toward the photographer, perhaps hoping for a morsel of food. Finding nothing, he wheeled around and flew off in search of other opportunities.

Watching this extraordinary interaction between a flock of gulls and a boat-load of passengers, I found myself wondering who was really the dominant force in this interaction. You can argue that somehow the birds had learned from experience that occasionally human beings will feed birds and that under certain circumstances it is safe to approach them. But it is also possible to argue that the birds had learned to train random groups of human beings to respond to specific signals and to offer food. Certainly, the single gull, deliberately posing for the photographer, offering himself as a subject to a man who had betrayed no

inclination to waste film on a gull, manifested a level of intelligence hard to credit, given the capacity of the bird's cranium. As I have reflected on the visitation of the birds, I have heard a voice whispering in my inner ear: "All talk about higher and lower forms of life, of greater and lesser intelligence is self-serving, hierarchical thinking. There is only intelligence and it is invested in all of existence; it manifests itself in interaction, not isolation, in relationship not solipsistic individualism." As I have reflected on the visitation of the birds, I have heard a voice whispering in my inner ear, a voice from a long time ago: "Not a sparrow falls without notice. All life is equally cherished in the heart of existence." It is a very minor theophany, but one which will not let me go.

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The weather was warm, the church was full of people who had arrived early to witness a wedding. The groom was out in front of the church pacing back and forth, nervously waiting for his parents who were already late, and who had sent word that it would be another twenty or thirty minutes before they would arrive. He didn't want the ceremony to proceed without them, but he was conscious of the church full of people waiting for the wedding to begin. He was even more aware of his bride, waiting in the limousine in the driveway for the signal that she should alight from her carriage and begin her procession down the aisle. I, of course, travelled back and forth between the parties, assuring them that it was not uncommon for a wedding to be late, and that worrying would not hasten the arrival of the parents, and keeping the organist posted on the course of events, and trying not to think about the fact that this was the second of four weddings scheduled for the day, that the next one was in Belle Mead, and that if things did not begin soon, I would be hard pressed to make that ceremony on time.

I remember being distracted, and harried, and unhappy about the circumstances which had conspired to saddle me with four weddings on a beautiful Saturday in the middle of my vacation. Then, in the midst of my frenzied running hither and thither, I almost stumbled across two small boys. They were dressed in identical suits and shirts and ties, and looked like two matching bookends, so identical were they in size and features. They were part of the wedding party. Their job was to come up the aisle just before the bridal party, take hold of the white runner rolled at the base of the steps, and pull it down the aisle so that the bridal party could proceed. We had rehearsed the details the night before; we had shown the little boys what they had to do, and when they would have to do it. We had assigned an adult to prompt them at the right moment. Everything had been taken care of.

Now, in the midst of all the confusion occasioned by the tardy parents of the groom, the concern of the bride, the chattering of the guests, the two little boys had been forgotten. Somehow, they managed to plant themselves in my path. I looked down at them; they looked solemnly up at me. Neither of them spoke. "Is something wrong?" I asked. One of them looked away, saying nothing. The other, with a profound dignity quite unexpected given the craziness of the occasion,

looked up at me and said, "I really am very apprehensive about this." I dropped to one knee and put my arms around their shoulders, and asked if they knew what they were to do? They nodded yes, they knew, but what if they did it wrong? What if they spoiled the whole wedding? Suddenly, looking into those faces, I saw not just these two little boys, but numberless children who are asked to shoulder responsibilities for the world all out of proportion to their age, especially little boys who so frequently are admonished to be men before they have learned what it means to be boys. I hugged them, and I said to them, "Nothing is going to go wrong; you will be fine; everything is going to be all right." And they seemed surprisingly satisfied with my reassurance.

As I knelt there, with my arms about their slender shoulders, I was suddenly aware of the outlandish promise I had just made to them. Here in the midst of this confusion, I had promised them that nothing would go wrong, that everything would be all right, that there was nothing to worry about. In point of fact, things were already going wrong. Ken was playing through his repertoire for the second or third time. The wedding was a half an hour late starting. The groom was about ready to climb the columns in the front of the church. The bride didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. And as far as the job assigned to those two little boys--the task of unrolling the white carpet down the aisle--I had seen many adult ushers make an absolute mess of that process, as the runner refused to unroll, or as it snaked back and forth down the aisle, or as it caught on a chair or a guest's shoe. And yet, I had rashly promised those two little boys that nothing would go wrong, and that everything would be all right. And they seemed to believe me.

And my mind went back to other times when I had made the same outrageous promise. How many times, when my own children were growing up, did I take them in my arms at times of stress or confusion or uncertainty, in moments of pain and grief and fear and comfort them and soothe them and whisper to them that everything was all right, that there was nothing to be afraid of, that everything would be all right. I made that promise to my children in the midst of a tornado, and in a hospital emergency room, and in a dentist's office, and while we were waiting to talk with the principal of the school, and when they were frightened by nightmares and when they grieved over the loss of a pet and the death of loved ones, and a dozen other times. I made that promise when the world was only thirty minutes away from total destruction. I took them into my arms and I promised them that they would be all right, that everything would be all right. And they believed me and they took me at my word. And they never reproached me when it did not quite turn out as I promised it would.

Kneeling there, in the vestibule of the church, I heard in my inner ear the voice of numberless human beings comforting their children and saying in a myriad tongues, "It will be all right, there is nothing to worry about, it will be ok." It is a promise we have made to each other, generation after generation, time out of mind, from the beginning of the human venture. It is a promise more profound than the words which give it voice, for behind those simple words is a deeper commitment: "I am here for you; however it comes out, I will be here for you;

together we will survive this thing; the fact of our concern for each other is the rock upon which we rely in an uncertain and unpredictable world."

As it turned out things went all right. The two little boys entered on cue, rolled out the carpet without a hitch, and when the wedding was over, smiled in my direction as if we had a secret between us no one else knew. And a voice in my inner ear whispered to me, "Never underestimate the power of an arm around a shoulder and the whispered promise, 'everything will be all right.' And never underestimate the commitment you have made when you make that promise. You may not be able to make things turn out as expected, but you can be there to make whatever happens right. Not even God can do more." It is a minor theophany, but one which rings in my ears and will not let me go.

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Later that same day, I found myself performing a wedding at Voorhees Chapel at Rutgers University, my fourth wedding of the day. By now, the words had begun to seem little more than rote. But suddenly, in the midst of this wedding, as the bride and the groom were making the ancient promises--promising to love and to cherish, come what may, till death--it was as if I were hearing them for the first time, as if they were being spoken for the very first time. And I heard myself, speaking in behalf of whom--society, the church, the universe--making promises--telling them that together they could find peace and joy and hope and delight, telling them that together they could overcome sorrow and grief and despair, promising them that their lives would be rich in the joys of life. And suddenly I realized how outrageous those promises were. Everyone in the room knew the odds against which marriages struggle in these days, and the pain and the uncertainty and confusion which visit all the human children of the earth at one time or another. And yet, there we stood, making outrageous promises, and believing them.

And when the wedding was over, I took the wine cup we had used, and carried it outside where I poured the remaining wine out on the ground at the base of a tree. And as the wine soaked into the ground, I found a prayer forming in my mind. "Grant them no more disappointment and sorrow than is necessary to nurture their growth, and help them discover the transforming power to be found in their relationship." And suddenly I heard a voice in my inner ear whispering, "That is what it is to be human--to make outrageous promises to each other, knowing that much of what is promised lies beyond human control. What is important is not what is promised, but that we promise, that we pledge ourselves to each other in order that in the relationship we may discover who we are. The difference between pain and sorrow and disappointment which destroys and the pain and sorrow and disappointment which fosters growth may be a matter of promises--the promise to share what life brings." It is a very minor theophany, but one to which I cling and upon which I rely as the years pass.

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I don't know what the point to all of this may be. I had half a dozen other sermon topics, each of them more important and better suited to begin a church year. But

this is the sermon which insisted upon being preached today. Why, I still do not know. But a voice in my inner ear whispers: "Preach what is laid upon you to preach; what results is not yours to determine. People will hear what they need to hear and do with it what they must." Perhaps that, too, is a minor theophany.