

God's Radical Grace

God's Radical Grace:
Challenging Sermons for Ordinary Time(s)

By

J. Harold Ellens

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

God's Radical Grace: Challenging Sermons for Ordinary Time(s),
by J. Harold Ellens

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This volume is dedicated to my seven children: Deborah Lynn Ellens, Jacqueline Ellens, Daniel Scott Ellens, Rebecca Jo Ellens, Harold Rocklan Ellens, Brenda Leigh Ellens, and Brett Alexander Ellens Hutchison. In my heart of hearts I believe it is true that I thought so hard about these things of God, worked so hard to master scripture and exegete the Bible honestly, and devoted myself to learn well the craft of rhetoric and oratory so as to express my transcendent faith vision in language and figures of speech that would be engaging and memorable, mainly to try to get across to my children the essence of life and truth as I see and believe it. I pray God that it works for them. If others have been and will be blessed by these lines, thanks be to God, the Pervasive Divine Spirit, incarnated in all aspects of the universe!

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FOREWORD

As I compose this Foreword for my respected colleague and mentor, The Reverend Doctor J. Harold Ellens, I am sitting among the trees at the top of Mt Tabor in the Galilee. A gentle (and very welcome) breeze is blowing across the crest of this ancient site that has long been associated with the numinous experience of Jesus that we have come to call the Transfiguration.

Whatever the historicity of that episode which first appears in Mark's groundbreaking narrative of Jesus, and however we assess the claims of Mt Tabor to have been the location of the event, this is a place that invites us to reflection. Here among the ruins of imperial Christianity the wind blows afresh, and we are urged to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

In this volume that you hold in your hands, Jay Harold Ellens has assembled the fruits of his own sustained listening to that same Spirit. For seventy years, and I suspect even a little longer, Ellens has been listening with intent, and with considerable credentials. With a natural wisdom honed in the parish, in the academy, and in the therapist's salon, he has listened long and hard to the still small voice (perhaps better translated as "the sound of sheer silence") that melts hearts of stone and splits the trees on the mountain top.

Long practiced in listening, and no slouch at communicating, Ellens now invites us to listen once more, or perhaps for the first time, to what he has discerned the Spirit saying to humanity in and through his own experience. The sermons gathered here represent, in my view, religion-scholarship at its best. Mortgaged to neither the church nor the academy, here is bold and faithful wisdom that seeks to transform the lives of God's people; all people.

One of the predictable tactics of people whose religious equilibrium is disturbed by critical scholarship is to question whether "this stuff preaches." Such a question is rarely genuine, and for the most part presupposes a negative response. Like the scribe confronted by Jesus' parable of the Samaritan, such people are seeking to evade the hard intellectual and spiritual work required to re-imagine their religious tradition. Yet Christianity desperately needs reform and renewal so that it may truly serve the best and deepest interests of humanity in the third millennium.

Ellens is not afraid of the hard work such revisioning requires, and for that I am grateful.

While his writing—and his preaching—may at times be confronting and disturbing, there is no doubting that such a compassionate and intellectually rigorous Christianity “preaches” well. Yes, friend, you can preach this stuff; and it will turn people around if they have ears to hear.

It is clear that Ellens is prepared to jettison many of the narrative and dogmatic structures within which Christianity has happily made itself a home. Some will find that radical prophetic streak challenging. Ellens will be happy to evoke such a response. Others will find his work offers encouragement to think creatively as we seek to fashion lives that are holy and true in the strange new land of our time and place. Ellens cheers us on.

However, as these gathered sermons attest, after discarding the historical and cultural accretions of traditional Christianity, Ellens engages with the deep truths of the biblical tradition that is both the source and the touchstone for Jews and Christians.

I have benefited from reading these collected sermons, and I am happy to recommend them to every reader and preacher for your own benefit as well.

—Gregory C. Jenks
Midsummer in the Holy Land, 2012

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“Harold Ellens knows how to craft a memorable sermon and how to always have something new to say, a new angle of vision, a beautifully told anecdote from his own immensely varied life experience. Shows why reading sermons need never become an old-fashioned pastime.”

—David J. A. Clines, Professor of Biblical Studies, Sheffield University

“As facets on a gem reveal its hidden beauty, so Dr. Ellens' sermons for Ordinary Time disclose the depth and beauty of the scriptures relating to these months of the Christian year between Pentecost and Advent. His long career prepared him well to author this book. With the approach of a scholar, the patience of a teacher, and the understanding of a pastor, he gives the reader new insights into these familiar scriptures. To read one of his sermons on a glorious summer day is to pray in the words of a favorite hymn, “Be Still, my Soul, The Lord is on Thy Side.” To read one of his sermons on a day of great need, will give the reader reason to be grateful for this book.”

—Beuna Coburn Carlson, Church Administrator and Christian Educator, PCUSA Retired.

“I have only actually *heard* one sermon by J. Harold Ellens, but reading this wonderful collection reminds me why he has long been one of my favorite homilists. More like a conversation than a monologue, these sermons immediately pull me into dialogue within myself and with God. Read them and be challenged, stimulated, provoked, informed, and edified. Receive them as medicine for your spirit and soul. Be prepared to be blessed by the Spirit that inspired them.”

—Dr. David G. Benner, author of *Soulful Spirituality* and *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*. Website: www.drdauidgbenner.ca

“Throughout Harold Ellens' life he has been called professor, doctor, and colonel. Yet, Ellens is never happier than when people know him as pastor. He is a man who loves to preach the good news of the Bible; something he clearly articulates as grace which is universal, unconditional, and radical. Yet, for Harold preaching is not reserved for the pulpit. His students know that God's grace is available to everybody. His patients know that God loves them no matter what. The soldiers he counsels straight from the battlefields of Iraq know that God's grace gets to the very core of their being and can heal the pain of their souls. However, it is in the traditional setting of a church on Sunday morning where Ellens preaches the message of grace with a craftsmanship honed over sixty years of service as a priest. All of his sermons are written with love and experience, and are always

aesthetic, humorous, intelligent, relevant, and life changing. It has been a pleasure to read this book.”

—Dr. Virginia Ingram, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

“Dr. Ellens' resources are inexhaustible. Now he offers us a collection of provocative sermons for Ordinary Time(s). He breathes new life into our preaching by sermons that both enrich and challenge. He calls us back to the radical nature of God's grace at a time when we are not sure that it speaks to our age. I highly recommend this book to anyone, lay or professional, who deals with God's gracious relationship with us.”

—LeRoy Aden, Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Care, Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Author of *Guilt and the Search for Fulfillment*.

“These sermons will inspire from the full power of grace, teach highlights of relevant biblical research with clarity of insight, and counsel the broken heart with meaning from out of the depths of a blend of mature psychology and the rich heritage of Christian thought and struggle. They are the fruit of a professional ministry which counsels with expertise, teaches with academic rigor, and dares to preach with prophetic sensitivity.”

—Jack T. Hanford, Th.D., Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies. Ferris State University.

“In twenty-seven sermons, J. Harold Ellens provides in this volume a lucid, challenging, and inspiring demonstration of the art of preaching. Every page bears testimony to the professional background and life experience of the author, as professor of theology and philosophy, as pastor, as U.S. Army Colonel, as psychologist and founding editor of *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, as research specialist in ancient Near-Eastern studies, as prodigious author, and as past master of the pulpit. He has preached “the Word” in 11 different countries from India to South Africa, Brazil, Australia, Great Britain, Germany, and Estonia. The sermons in this volume attest to Ellens' controlling theme that the irrepressible human hunger for meaning is universal and that Scripture addresses this hunger in unanticipated, grace-filled, and saving ways.”

—Wayne G. Rollins, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Religion, Assumption College; Adjunct Professor of New Testament, Hartford Seminary.

“As a parishioner privileged to attend to Dr Ellens' preaching, I found my understanding of Christianity overturned and re-formed by his themes of radical grace, wholeness, health, and the enjoyment of life. In later years I have never seen a congregation pay more rapt attention to a sermon than when he was a guest preacher at our small congregation of retired Florida sunbirds. I think you, too, will be entranced and energized as this series of sermons expounds the themes of grace.”

—David Gritter, MS, Mechanical Engineer, Devoted Churchman, Lay-Theologian, and long-time Ruling Elder.

"In these sermons one finds far more than a preacher's facility with words. These sermons embody soulful and genuine response to sacred texts. Jay Harold Ellens' attentive love for these scriptures is evident; the vision they inspire is clear and compelling. Addressing basic Christian truths these sermons inform the mind and strengthen the spirit."

—Ralph Underwood, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Care, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

"Imaginative, informal, engaging, informed, playful, and confronting, Hal Ellens' sermons will make you laugh and cry – and stay awake, because he cuts through to issues that matter. Keen to see that "the center holds", as he puts it, he keeps coming back to "unconditional and universal grace and love", which both preserves the connection with the text and the connection with us, the readers. From the experience and wisdom of 60 years of preaching – a gift to savor!"

—William Loader PhD, FAHA, Emeritus Professor, Murdoch University, Western Australia

"A fine collection of scholarly sermons presented over time noting major societal changes that engage one's interest. Refreshing and most thoughtfully presented for one to ponder. An occasional sentence of wit and a dry humor sneaks in and you find yourself checking the scriptures. We're reminded how our stories blend with the Jesus story and what matters is the message. The Holy Spirit has been at work a long time and good sermons are truly a gift."

—Helen Morrison, a Professional career consultant, Presbyterian Elder, Presbytery Staff Person, Director of Christian Education, Pastoral Associate, General Assembly Council, and President, Presbyterian Older Adult Ministry Network.

"Harold Ellens' *Radical Grace* is that if we really read the Bible, the Christian mandate turns out to be: Live with abandon, God's abandon. Live in abandonment of that inner voice that says we are not good enough, and God's love could never be for us. Grace is given to all without any constraint. There is the radical aspect of this message: it is given to all humanity of all descriptions, just as they are – whether we like it (or them) or not! To live with God's abandon is to understand that it is God who is our worth and who gives it to everybody without exception, including the direst enemies who have yet no faith in God. Ellens has captured the intent of creation and the intent and outcome of the journey from Eden to the New Jerusalem. We are going to have to give up a lot of presuppositions and prejudices to read and appreciate this book of sermons. However, if you can do that without throwing it down in rebellion against that challenging message, the prize at the end is grace, that came in person, for you personally. God cannot resist you; can you resist God, as God comes to you through Ellens' soul-challenging sermons?"

—Kamila Blessing, PhD, Episcopal priest, New Testament scholar, and Author of *Speak Ye First the Kingdom*

“Radical grace: the action of God. Radical change: the response of people. These are the two themes that run through all of these sermons by Hal Ellens. Readers—both clergy and laity—will find here a depth of biblical insight and spiritual imagination that will enrich the entire Christian year of worship events. These are sermons that will nurture and inspire an individual and a congregation.”

—John M. Mulder, former President of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“There is a Jewish saying, “Whatever is not in the Torah is not in the world.” Hal Ellens knows the world, and he knows his Bible. He has been tested and tried by life, so he uses life to interpret the Bible and the Bible to interpret human existence. He is a theologian who combines scholarship with empathy and compassion. Whoever reads his sermons with an open mind and an open heart will be nourished and enlightened.”

—Schuyler Brown, Anglican Priest and Professor Emeritus, Toronto, ON, Canada

“These sermons, drawing on Ellens' rich experience as a pastor and counsellor, combine psychological insight with spiritual wisdom.”

—Professor Richard Bauckham, FBA, FRSE, Professor of Biblical Studies, St Andrews and Cambridge Universities, UK

INTRODUCTION

These sermons are a product of 60 years of preaching and 70 years of mastering the sacred scriptures and the ancient languages in which they were originally given to the world. My theological perspective has grown, developed, and matured during those decades. The present form of these messages is an expression of my present perspective on the things of God. I was raised in a very conservative community of faith that depended more on its theological tradition and its ethnic value system than on a need to listen afresh to the carefully crafted cadences of the biblical text.

My present perspective retains almost none of the formal constructs of those formative years, except a devout reverence for and appreciation of the Bible as a report on profound spiritual experience in very self-aware communities who perceived that God was present to them in their very human journey in history. Through the decades in which I have redigested the traditions of my youth and expanded vastly the scope of my learning and understanding of these things of God, I have found the essence of my faith surfacing with increasing clarity. The peripheral has fallen away. I suppose that is the inevitable process of growing up with a perpetually inquiring mind while cast providentially into life circumstances that stimulated and challenged newer and more relevant ways of thinking things out. The important thing is that the center has held. God is in Christ reconciling the world unto God's self by the kind of universal grace we cannot escape.

I heartily reject most of the historic constructs of Christology. I am convinced that most of it has been the Church's unconscious temptation to escape into an intellectualized construction of the Christian faith. This is an escape from an openness to the vital and life giving divine spirit. I am certain that the concepts of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, when applied to God should be understood as metaphors for the modes in which God shows up in history. When the church began to use those metaphors as ontological definitions of the essential nature of the divine, it created a theological idolatry. When the church proceeded from there to formulate its Christology as historically presented, Jesus Christ became an idol that obstructed our ability to see God, instead of a lens for viewing a crucial aspect of God's manifestation in history. The ancient creeds are an unfortunate mechanism for this misstep of the historic church. In those

creeds the bishops attempted to take the biblical Hebrew metaphors and translate them into Neo-Platonic Greek philosophical definitions. That got the church off on a tragic track of misconceiving the biblical vision.

In John 14 Jesus made it clear that the age of Christ had ended and the age of the spirit had begun. He enjoined us to let the spirit lead us into all the truth. The church urgently needed, as Tertullian contended in the third century, a theology of the Divine Spirit: a Pneumatology, not a Christology. However, the church escaped from the Spirit because the Divine Spirit was impossible to quantify and control. Jesus himself said, "The Spirit blows where it will. You can hear the sound of it, see the effects of it; but you cannot tell whence it comes and whither it goes. So is everyone who is born of the spirit" (Jn 3).

The Divine Spirit is scary for some folks and it is dangerous to the organizational stability of institutions, so the church escaped into the propositions of Christology and created a mythology from which the world is now moving away - rejecting the Church and its dogma. Everywhere now we hear folks saying authentically that they are no longer religious but they are spiritual. That disaffection from the historic church and its traditions of faith is a direct result of the misstep in the fourth century. That creedal shift of the faith from the heart to the head, from life attuned to the Divine Spirit to life imprisoned in an orthodox theological box.

It is urgently necessary that people of faith now appreciate the import of developing an understanding of God as the Divine Spirit who is pervasive throughout all creation, the life-force in all living things, and the presence of Spirit in every human spirit. God is Spirit and they that worship God must worship God in Spirit and in truth" (Jn 4). To use a rather clumsy philosophical term for it, we should all be converted to Panentheism. That means we should begin to realize God as the energy, force, agent, vitality, and mindful presence that is evident in all God's material universe as the creating, sustaining, energizing, and guiding dynamo – the soul of which the material world is the bodily manifestation. If we could develop that sense of the presence of God with us in all things, we would rather automatically realize the exciting anticipation of how the Divine Spirit will show up around the next corner in our lives. God as Spirit always does for those who have "the eyes to see and ears to hear."

I think I have discerned over the 80 years of my life what I consider to be an ironic psychology joke. Many of my colleagues who started out as I did in what may as well be called American Fundamentalism or rigidly conservative biblicistic theological traditions and narrow ethnic value systems, still care much about the questions of biblical truth and the

issues of authentic personal spirituality, after decades of wrestling for a better understanding. Many others have given up on the key questions or fallen away. Some of us have matured far beyond those early primitive constructs, but we know what the questions are and we look for answers that honestly address those questions without abandoning the heart's hunger for spiritual meaning. Many other colleagues who started out in a much more enlightened and, should I say, liberal Christian faith and culture also continue to pursue the path of progressive enlightenment and concerned growth, while others seem now after all these decades no longer to care about the essential questions of personal spirituality, the nature of God, and the quality of our relationship to God. They seem to be off somewhere in the trivial formalities of socio-political quandaries. They seem more preoccupied with ecology, climatology, and sociology than with pneumatology. Those things are important, but we shall never make sense out of them without a clear sense of how they are issues first of all of the presence of the Divine Spirit in our lives and world.

It is my fervent prayer that these sermons may provide new eyes and ears for discerning the presence of the Spirit; and move some inquiring souls to experience the power and presence of God as the all pervading Divine Spirit.

All Saints Day / Reformation Day 2012

SERMON ONE

GOD'S RADICAL GRACE: MICAH 7:18-20 (19C), JEREMIAH 31:33

Who is a God like our God? He pardons iniquity and he passes over transgression. He will not keep his anger forever. He delights in steadfast love. He is faithful to us when we are unfaithful to him. He tramples our iniquity under his feet and casts all our sins into the depths of the sea. Moreover, he guaranteed that to us through our ancestors from the days of old (Micah). I will put my law within you and I will write it upon your hearts. I will be your God and you shall be my people (Jeremiah).

In the dark dank dawn of a misty morning in April of 1963 the steel grey hulk of a US Navy ship loosed its moorings from the pier at Groton, Connecticut. It drew silently out of the harbor and cut its way keenly into the choppy waves of the north Atlantic. It was a gallant ship and it had 127 fine young red-blooded American men on board. It was the USS Thresher, the navy's first atomic submarine. This was its maiden voyage, its shake-down cruise.

The Thresher made its rendezvous that morning with the mother ship at the appointed time, somewhere in the vastness of the north Atlantic. It began immediately with the prescribed sea trials: Identification of Friend and Foe (IFF), target acquisition and attack, depth soundings, silent pursuits, communication drills, mock missile launches, and various battle tactics. At 2:14 that afternoon the real test came: a high speed dive to a still classified depth far below 2000 feet, secured in radio silence.

It was a gallant ship with the most sophisticated technology in the world. Her superb ships-company was made up of well trained men and they knew what they were doing. All went very well for nearly an hour as that fine ship and her 127 men drove steeply toward the bottom of the sea. Then suddenly at 3:13 the airways crackled with a desperate call, apparently from the Thresher: an SOS from a radio man, sent in high volume, but broken off suddenly in the middle. After that there was ominous silence!

The mother ship activated all her powerful communications machinery to reestablish contact with the Thresher; but there was only silence. Silence all that afternoon – as the mother ship notified Naval Headquarters in Groton, Washington, and Norfolk. Silence reigned all that night as the US Navy flexed her mighty muscle round the world in a desperate effort to rescue the Thresher and her men. But there was only silence all the next day as deep submersibles were brought to the site from Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Silence all that week! Silence to all eternity!

That gallant ship and her 127 men was sunk in the depths of the sea. They were lost! Gone! Erased, as though they had never been! What is sunk in the depths of the sea cannot be recovered. It cannot again be retrieved, cannot be resurrected. It cannot be brought back, for good or ill. What is lost in the depths of the sea is erased.

Micah declares that God has cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. All our broken relationships, betrayals, failures to achieve God's ideal for us, all covenant breaking attitudes, and God forsaking behavior are erased from the equation of our relationship with God. They are lost! Gone! Erased! They can never be recovered. They cannot be resurrected against us ever again: all our sins are erased as though they had never been. God thinks we are saints. So Jeremiah can say with confidence, "God injects a new covenant – hence, a new consciousness - into our hearts. A new law God writes in our hearts which says 'They are my people in spite of themselves. That is the divine law.'" That is all there is to it! Who is a God like our God?

Micah lived long before John wrote his gospel lines which say that the old law came through Moses, but this grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Jeremiah and Micah both lived at times of enormous turbulence and moral tragedy in Israel. In Micah's day the power people in Israel would sell the poor for a pair of shoes. The prophet said that the smoke of their sacrifices was, consequently, a stench in the nostrils of the Almighty. It was a time of a covenant-breaking and God-forsaking community.

Micah knew that if he were to cause a real change in Israel he needed to change people at the heart. To do that he needed to find a memorable metaphor that would stick in their psycho-spiritual gullets so they could not cough it out. He knew he had to free them from their fear, guilt, and shame so they could spend their psychological and spiritual energies on growing toward God. So he picked this unforgettable image. God has cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. The Apocalypse of St. John calls it the sea of God's eternal forgetfulness.

Other metaphors would not work. Micah might have said that God fires our sins off into outer space; But God does not shoot our sins in

hermetically sealed capsules into the far reaches of the universes. Even Micah knew already then that what goes up must come down. Remember Apollo 13 which was hit by a meteorite near the moon and was teased back to earth over a three day period without its power systems working. Moreover, Micah did not picture God burying our sins in the sands of the sea shore at ebb tide. He knew even in his day what always happens to hidden pirates chests. They eventually wash up and are hauled into court as evidence against the scoundrels who buried the stolen treasure. Only *this* memorable metaphor will work to tell God's real story. God has cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. Gone, lost, erased, never recoverable, never resurrected against you again!

So that is Micah's memorable metaphor and Jeremiah's radical concept of covenant, the covenant of divine grace written upon the human heart. What, then, is the message here? Why, of course, that with God to forgive is to forget. God looks at you and me, indeed, at every human being, and God cannot remember that we are sinners, inadequate and flawed humans, who continue to fall short of the mark. God has forgotten that we are the people who, in Paul's words, always come short of the glorious destiny God has designed for us, made as we are in God's image. God looks at us and sees only admirable saints.

The memorable message of Micah and Jeremiah is the same as Jesus' message in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The popular German preacher and theologian after WW II, Helmut Thielicke, said this should really not be known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. There are two sons in trouble in the parable. Thielicke said that this is a parable about the Waiting Father. It turns out remarkably in that parable, for both the prodigal son and for his elder brother, as well, that the issue at stake is never a question of the father's unconditional acceptance of the sons; but always the question of their capacity for unconditional acceptance of the father's unconditional acceptance of them.

That is our predicament – as it was for ancient Israel. So Micah's marvelously memorable metaphor brings precisely the meaningful message Jeremiah wanted to nail down, once and for all. What is that meaning? We cannot sin ourselves out of God's grace. We cannot squirm out of God's long embrace. Nobody can! Ever! Forever! God's grace is that radical, and that unconditional, and that universal.

So the reason to be one of God's people is not to save your bloody soul from hell. The only reason to be a Christian is because it is more fun. It is more fun to live all of life, through all its ups and downs, in the full assurance of God's grace. Being a Christian is not a command but an invitation; not an obligation but an opportunity, not a burden to be labored

under and sweated out for a lifetime but a possibility to be seized and celebrated, now and forevermore.

Most of us do not want such radical grace. I do not want such radical grace. If grace is that radical and God's acceptance and forgiveness of me is that unconditional, then I must give up the conditionality of my relationship with you, regardless of your character, quality, race, creed, or gender. I must embrace you in spite of yourself, and open myself to such an equal embrace from you.

Moreover, I do not like such radical grace for another reason. It means I have no ultimate control over my ultimate destiny in my relationship with God. I cannot be an illustrious churchman for 60 years and secretly think in my heart that it gives me some leverage with God. I cannot live my life all week in charity and grace and then on Saturday night grab God by the shirt collar and declare, "God, you owe me!" Like the prodigal son, I cannot even sign up to do God's will and work as God's servant, *in order to earn credit with God* and insure God's favor toward me. God insists that to God I look like God's son no matter what I have done with my life.

Notice that remarkable moment when the prodigal returns! His father had been looking down that dusty road every day hoping, praying, and waiting to see his son again. Thus the father saw the son before he saw his father. The father ran to him and embraced him; but the son pushed him away and declared, "I am unworthy to be called your son, let me be your hired man. Let me work for you and thereby prove to you that, despite my misbehavior, deep down inside I really am a good guy." That son had trouble accepting unconditionally the unconditional acceptance of his father. He believes he would have more power in the relationship equation if he could hire onto the work force and so prove himself worthy of honor and esteem. He could not imagine simply accepting his own inherent worthiness just because he is his father's son in spite of his behavior. The father, however, insists, "You are not my son because of *your* character or behavior but because of *my* character and behavior as your father. You are my son as long as I insist on fathering you, and I will never let you go." So they killed the fatted calf and threw a big feast of celebration that the wastrel had returned.

Of course, the elder brother proves to have a big problem with this. He refused to come to the celebration for his brother's return. Typical of his father, he went out to the elder brother and asked him why he would not celebrate. The elder brother spit bitterly through his teeth, "All these years I have done my duty and you never celebrated me." To this the father replied in effect, "Son, you have the same problem as your brother. You think you are my son and have my esteem because you did your duty? You

think you have *earned* your way into my favor as my son by behaving yourself in keeping with conservative traditions? All that I own is yours. Your brother took his inheritance long ago. You know that you are really working for yourself – your own gain and reputation. I esteem you for that. But if your reason for your faithfulness as a good churchman for 60 years is to earn my love and grace, you should have raised more hell.

Your status as my son does not depend upon your having done your duty. Your sonship does not depend upon your behavior, quality, or character as my son. It depends upon my behavior, quality, and character as your father. You cannot sin yourself out of my grace nor squirm out of my long embrace. That is because of the quality of my love for you, in spite of yourself. You should have raised more hell! You are too worried about appearances and prescriptions. You are angry because we are celebrating the prodigal's return. Don't you know that he was dead to me and he is alive again? He was lost to me and he is found! Nothing else counts!"

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON TWO

THE BACKSIDE OF GOD: EXODUS 33:21-23

You cannot see God's face and live.
You will see the shadow of God's backside.

God is very hard to see. When I look back on the 80 years of my life I can see the moments of the presence of God. The pattern, nonetheless, is very subtle. All the things that I thought were the crucial influences forming and informing my life have turned out to be relatively irrelevant. I would have pushed and shoved them into place with might and main but they have had little useful consequence for me or others. On the other hand, the things that I thought were the great inadvertencies, frustrating difficulties, or even tragedies of my life, from which God would have protected me had God any brains at all, have turned out to be the hinges of my destiny. I think that only once was it true that at the moment that they were happening I could see their critical importance. Moreover, except for that one instance, I have only been able to see in retrospect the golden thread of God's presence or guidance. When I can see it at all it is only when I look back to try to make sense out of what seemed senseless. The reason is that God's presence to us in this world is incredibly subtle.

It is probably a good thing that God is so subtle. If God suddenly showed God's self plainly and unequivocally, every other day, once a week, once a year, or a couple of times in a lifetime, probably that would not be good for us. It might very well be counterproductive. We would most likely forget the content of the experience and concentrate instead upon the spectacular drama of the event. When we experience an event that dramatically suggests that it could be explained in no other way than that it is "of the Lord," we are thoroughly persuaded of it at the time. Then, said C. S. Lewis, we spend the next six weeks rationalizing it away.

More likely, if God stepped out boldly and plainly before us, we would simply set up a shrine and thereafter worship the shrine where God had appeared. The Israelites of the Hebrew Bible always seemed to be playing around the edges of doing that very thing. So God was always busy

destroying their shrines and idols, as God is always busy frustrating us in our efforts to concretize God, to make God more obvious, and to satisfy the deep inner hunger of our souls by means of a more tangible and palpable experience of God's presence.

We tend to think we might be able to capture God in our creeds and theological constructs and pop God into our vest pockets and keep God there, well defined and, therefore, well controlled. Preachers and theologians, unfortunately, have made a major case out of getting God incarcerated in our theological propositions. I often wonder if we are trying to keep God close or keep God at bay. Of course, we are all tempted to throw a large interpretational net over God and haul God into our own private or denominational world view.

Moses tried to do exactly that in Exodus 33:12-23. "Moses said to the Lord ... 'I pray ... show me now your ways that I may know you ...,' and [God] said, 'My provident presence will go with you' And [Moses] said to him, 'If your provident presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here' And the Lord said to Moses, 'I will do exactly this thing you have requested' Moses said, '... show me your glory (true and full nature).' And [God] said, 'I will make all my goodness (cherishing presence) pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name, "The Lord" ... but you cannot see my face. A human cannot look me in the face and survive Look, there is a place close to me, a rocky crevice, where you may stand; while my sustaining presence passes by I will place you in a cleft of that rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand and you shall see my backside but not my face."

God is *intentionally* hard to see.

Exploring the Subtlety

William James, the great psychologist at the turn of the 19th into the 20th century, and Gordon Allport after him, said that there are two kinds of spirituality: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic spirituality is the sense of satisfying spiritual experience that we get from the projects, activities, worship events, and liturgies of our religion: the things we can act out in our religious practice. Some people find those completely satisfying and prefer them to intrinsic spirituality which has to do with the heartfelt, deep inner sensations of hunger for God and communion with God.

My father was both an extrinsic and intrinsic Christian while my mother was more profoundly intrinsic spiritually. My father was a thoughtful lay-theologian. My mother was a pietist. In any case, all of us

extrinsic and intrinsic believers, somewhere in our souls, long for a clearer, deeper, steadier signal, and a more certain trumpet – a more tangible experience of God’s presence. However, God does not give us much satisfaction on that. God is consummately subtle, extremely hard to see. You really have to search God out; and you have to spend a long time at it to make sure the intimations of God’s presence make any sense. Most of all you have to have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

Moses was quite sure that he had seen God at the burning bush. He was quite sure he had gotten his commission right. So he went to Egypt and he did all of the things he was supposed to do. He raised the revolution and led the children of Israel out of Egypt. By the time of this story in Exodus 33 he had been leading them for a couple of decades. Then it came to him that he was not quite so sure about things as he thought he had been. He was not sure he had seen God since the burning bush, and that was a long time back. Was that really God he had seen? He was busy rationalizing away his spiritual mountain top experience. So he challenged God for being so subtle.

He said “I want to see your face.” You’ve been sneaking around the edges of our lives here for all these years. You intimate that you are leading us somewhere and we are not getting anywhere. In fact it is clear that the people would rather worship a tangible golden calf than keep up this subtle quest for your presence and your promised land. We want to see you face to face. We want some clear signal - a concrete God we can experience. We are on the cusp now of jumping off into the final attack. We are ready to cross the river Jordan and go into the Promised Land. However, that promise seems less and less clear, more and more uncertain, because your trumpet is muffled. It is very hard to see you. It is hard to discern whether what we thought was you, really was you. We are beginning to wonder if the notion of the Promised Land really was your idea revealed to us, or our idea conjured upon in our imagination.

We cannot quite determine whether you are our projection of some kind of inner psychological wish. Are you really our perception or our projection of who is guiding and leading us? “Show us your glory!” The Hebrew word used here for glory means “your whole nature, character, and operation.” Moses was insisting on what we all want, and what we all seek at some sub-cognitive level. Moses continued, in effect, to say, “Lay out before us once and for all the total picture of what in the world you are up to, God!”

God replied to Moses in this story by promising, “I will do what you ask. I will show myself to you; in fact I have already done so. However, you cannot see my face and survive: my full nature and work. If I showed

you everything that I have been up to in the last 10,000 years, and particularly in the twentieth century, you would not be able to sort it out or take it in. If I showed you how I was present in the prosperity of your life and in the impairment of your child, in the death of your loved one and in the rise of Hitler and Stalin. If I gave you a snapshot of the total picture of how I am present in all of that stuff of history, and what I am up to, it would be so overwhelming to you that you would not be able to come away with any kind of integrated sanity. Do you really want to see how I was in the 150 million WW II human deaths, to say nothing of all the animals?"

There is no suggestion in this passage that God causes any of the suffering and tragedy of life and history, but it suggests that God was present to it and was not absent from it. "If I laid all of that before you in one presentation you would be distracted and overcome. Only I, God, can handle all the extremities of history and continue to function. I will show myself to you but you cannot look me full in the face. You cannot read my whole story. You cannot see my full and true nature and survive it. I will tell you what I will do. I will put you in the cleft of the rock near me, and I will put my hand over you, and then I will pass by. After that I will take my hand away and you will see the shadow of my passing. You will see my backside."

Moses wanted to see God face to face. So did Elijah. So did Isaiah. Isaiah said that in the year that King Uzziah died, he saw God in the temple and God's *train* filled the temple, the tail end of God's regal robe. That is all that Isaiah got to see: God's tail end. Elijah thought he had seen God on Mt. Carmel when he defeated the prophets of Baal. It turns out, according to the angel that spoke to Elijah, that God does not live on Mt. Carmel. He lives on Mt. Horeb. Elijah had a bad map. When Elijah went down to Jerusalem after the spectacular events on Mt. Carmel, he expected God would have changed everything, but nothing had happened to change things in Jerusalem.

Elijah began to wonder if it really was God who had acted on Mt. Carmel to destroy the prophets of Baal. Baal worship was still flourishing with official sanction in Jerusalem. He wondered if God intended to deliver his people in Jerusalem from Ahab and Jezebel and give the Israelites the renewed spirituality that Elijah wanted for them, but Jezebel was still killing the prophets of God. At least, it seemed to Elijah that if God was up to anything redemptive, God was awfully subtle and hard to see. So Elijah went to Mt. Horeb, as the angel suggested, and when he got there some dramatic things started to happen immediately. An earthquake tore the mountain apart. He thought God was in the earthquake but God