

Sermon for Sunday, January 10, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, Pastor  
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"GOD'S COMING OUT PARTY"

St. Matthew 27:33-54

Text: "And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom."  
St. Matthew 27:51

In one of his novels, H. G. Wells tells of a man in danger of total collapse both mentally and physically. In his desperation, he felt his only hope was to identify himself with something bigger and better than himself. That is the instinctive desire of the human heart--to identify one's self with something or someone bigger and better than self. But when we begin to talk in those terms we are really talking theologically. We are talking theologically because the biggest and best with which man can identify himself is God.

As the world in which we live becomes increasingly depersonalized, man's problem becomes more and more intense. He seeks that or those to which or with whom he can find identity that gives life meaning, purpose and direction. Many of us who are older have identified with what the young people call "the establishment." It is hard for us to understand the sort of identities that they make, but each of us--young and old--has done exactly the same thing--we have identified ourselves with something that gives some meaning to our lives. The only real difference is the things we have identified with--our needs are all the same.

So man's need today is what it has always been--the need to identify himself with that which is biggest and best in life, God. But here lies the crux of the problem and the heart of the dilemma --how does a man find God? How does a man gain access to God in order to identify himself?

One of the ways man has sought to identify with God is to replace him. That may sound strange, yet it is true. If you can't find God or see God or lay your hands on God, you do the next best thing: you create something that you can find or see or lay hands on and endue it with the powers of God. See how it works. Picture the Jews after their escape from Egypt. They are in the wilderness, refugees from slavery, dispossessed, aliens in a barren wilderness, camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Moses, their leader, is their access to God, but Moses is up on the mountain talking to God and he stays and stays and stays. Because they are lonely and afraid and insecure there in the desert, their need for God is terribly intense. So they make a golden calf as a God-substitute--something they can see and touch.

You and I are more sophisticated, perhaps. Our God-substitutes are not so brazen and obvious. But we have them just the same. Hitler substituted the Third Reich for God. Communism substitutes the state for God. And I heard someone say the other day--quite accurately, I think--that when we are very ill, desperately sick, we endue our doctors with god-like qualities. And all of us, in greater or lesser degree, are guilty of substituting tangible, material things for God. For most of us hard, cold cash in a retirement program is much better visible security for old age than an intangible, invisible God.

So one way to gain access to God is through tangible, visible God-substitutes. A second way man tries to find God is through his mind. God for some people lies at the end of a logical process of reasoning. Unfortunately, this doesn't work very well either. You see, when God is measured by the human mind, he isn't a very big God. Look what can happen: the human mind is limited by what it knows about the universe, it is limited by the science it knows, and it begins to despair of finding God.

God. Finally, in frustration it declares him dead. Of course, this doesn't mean we are not to use our minds when we think about God. But it does mean that God is larger than our ability to think or conceive and God can't be limited by our small intellectual capacities.

I think this is something of what St. Paul meant when he wrote, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" And then he wrote, "Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise."

A third way man has tried to find God is through feeling--through his emotions, his heart. Many people want to "feel" God. They want to experience him in an emotional encounter. And there are certain denominations whose main emphasis is on feeling. If a service of worship doesn't whip up their emotions, if the tears don't flow, they feel cheated. The Corinthians were like that. St. Paul had to warn them of their excesses and admonish them that all things should be done decently and in order.

But what if your relationship to God is limited by your feelings. What happens when you feel badly? What if you are so hurt by sorrow or so sick in body that you are incapable of religious emotions? Where is God then? No, our relationship to God cannot depend on emotions alone. Why an upset stomach could cut us off from God!

A fourth way men have sought to find access to God is through being good, by being righteous. A lot of people think that if they are morally upright, God will approve of them. But the problem is this: the more morally sensitive a man is, the more aware he is of his sin. The closer we get to God, the more aware we are of our unworthiness. Look at the prophet Isaiah in the temple when he had a vision of God. "Woe is me," he cried, "for I am lost; for I am man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!" Or picture Peter the first time he realizes who Jesus is. Down on his knees he goes, "Depart from me," he cries, "for I am a sinful man." As Seneca the great Greek philosopher wrote of himself he called himself, "homo non tolerabilis"--a man not to be tolerated. He said, "Nor is it only that we have done wrong; we shall do so to the end." So, the man who thinks he has access to God because of his goodness simply does not understand himself.

What we have been talking about this morning is man's need to identify himself with that which is bigger and better than himself--to identify himself with the very best in life is to give meaning, dignity and purpose to life. And the very best that man can identify with is God. Yet, as man seeks to find God and identify with him, his efforts fail. God-substitutes won't work. Our intellectual creations of God won't work. Feelings don't bring us to God. And being good turns out to be a delusion and an impossibility.

So God had a coming out party. Actually God wasn't hiding at all. We just couldn't see him because our sins got in the way. So God did something about our sins. He went to the cross on Calvary and paid for our sins. He died in our place. He wiped those sins out so we could see him again. God got out there where we could see him and touch him. As the Bible puts it, the Word became flesh; God took upon himself human form. So Jesus said, "He who has seen me has seen the father." Jesus showed us who God was and what God was like and how much God loved us and how much we could trust him.

Yes, God had a coming out party. It was a party that lasted almost three years. It was a party that wasn't over until finally somebody--somebody at a place called Calvary--somebody on a cross--cried out, "it is finished." And you know, a funny thing happened. Down below Calvary hill in the city of Jerusalem--there in the temple of the Jews--a curtain suddenly tore in two. It wasn't just any curtain. Behind that curtain was the ark of the covenant that symbolized to the Jews the presence of God. And now the curtain was pulled open, torn open, ripped open. And it meant the presence of God was let loose in the whole world. Yes, God had a coming out party--and Jesus came to the party.

If you want to get hold of something bigger and better than yourself, if you want to get your hands on God, he is right here this morning. Here on the table are the symbols of his presence, of his love, of how much he cares for you.

God wants you to come to his party this morning. He wants you to have a relationship to him. He loves you--he forgives you--he offers you himself. He says to you "Come to my party. Here at my table eat with me, drink with me." God offers you something bigger and better than yourself--he offers you himself.