

**WHERE ARE YOU?**  
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**The New Church in Bath, Maine**  
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Genesis 3:1-9

John 14:1-7

Responsive Reading #23, pp. 151f.

**Hymns:** \*81

\*\*127

340

*Heaven and Hell* 479

*And the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"*

Genesis 3:9

In the creation stories, the first thing God says to humankind is that they should be fruitful and multiply and take responsibility for the earth (Genesis 1:28). This is followed by the description of the gifts of plant life and animal life (Genesis 1:29-30). Neither of these addresses calls for any response. It is with our text, in the third chapter of Genesis, that "the Lord God" first initiates a conversation with us, and it is at this critical juncture that the message from God, the revelation, if you will, comes not as a statement but as a question.

From one common-sense point of view, this is strange, very strange indeed. God is omniscient, which means that God knows all the answers. In fact, as we read the story we assume as a matter of course that God knows perfectly well where Adam and Eve are. As the story continues, it becomes clear that the whole conversation is oblique. When God asks "Where are you?", the direct answer would be, "Over here, behind this tree." Adam, though, answers the question behind the question; and his answer is quite true. He was afraid and hid because he was ashamed of his nakedness. This admission opens the way to more questions. "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the forbidden fruit?"

Again, the simple answer would be "Yes"; again, Adam answers the question behind the question; and again, his answer is perfectly true. He had been given the fruit by the woman whom God had provided him. This leads in turn to the final question, addressed to the woman: "What have you done?" The woman first answers the question behind the question by saying "The serpent beguiled me," and then answers the question itself: "and I ate."

This is certainly a suggestive picture of divine-human interaction. It portrays God as revealing questions rather than answers, and it portrays us not as ignorant of the answers but as trying to evade them. The whole process of leading us through our reluctance begins with a very simple question that does not seem to have anything to do with what has happened. It is in fact not a question about what has happened, not at all a question the past, but a question about the present. "Where are you?"

Let's leap from the mythical language of the creation story to a very ordinary situation in present-day living. Imagine for a moment that some old friends from out of town are coming to visit you for the first time in years. You've sent them directions, and in the

middle of the afternoon the phone rings. "We're getting on towards Bath and we can't find the directions you sent." If you really want to be helpful, your immediate reaction is a question—"Where are you?" It does no good whatever to give them directions from someplace where they aren't. If they tell us that they're just coming in sight of the Holiday Inn, we'll tell them to take the next off ramp. That is certainly not what they should do if in fact they're just coming to Freeport.

If we then assume that the Lord is constantly trying to lead each one of us toward our unique home in heaven, the Genesis question is right where it needs to be, right up front. The Lord cannot lead us from where we aren't, so the Lord will always be giving us directions that start from where we are. If we insist that we are somewhere else, those directions will make no sense whatever.

There are other stories in which God initiates a conversation, and they all follow the a pattern that moves through confrontation to humility, then to reassurance, and finally to commission. In the vision that called him to the office of prophet, for example, Isaiah saw the Lord enthroned on high, was overwhelmed by his sense of sinfulness, was cleansed by the coal from the altar, and finally accepted his call with the familiar words, "Here am I; send me" (Isaiah 6:8).

We find this same pattern in stories about Moses, Ezekiel, the disciples, and John; and we find also that each story begins with the identification of some locus in time or space or both. We are told that Isaiah's vision came in the temple "in the year that king Uzziah died" (Isaiah 6:1) This marked the end of an era, since according to 2 Kings 15:2, he had come to the throne at the age of sixteen and had reigned for fifty-two years. The vast majority of Judah's citizens had never known any other ruler and could scarcely imagine anyone else on the throne. We are told that Moses was tending flocks in the wilderness and had come to Horeb, the mountain of God, when he saw the burning bush. Ezekiel was by the river Chebar in Babylon, and we are given not only the year but the month and the day when the heavens were opened to him (Ezekiel 1:1). The transfiguration occurred "after six days" on a high and remote mountain (Matthew 17:1, Mark 9:2). John's vision of the risen Lord happened on the island of Patmos, on the Lord's day (Revelation 1:9-10). Only in the case of the transfiguration are the disciples taken to a special place. In all the other stories, the revelation comes to the recipients where they happen to be.

If we take this as emblematic of the way the Lord tries to get through to us, it says that four times out of five it will happen while we are simply engaged in the process of living, doing what we normally do. It is telling us that we will not hear him unless we recognize or realize where we are; and it may even be telling us that the Lord gets through to us *whenever* we recognize or realize where we really are.

This makes sense. To recognize or realize where we really are is to see ourselves in the Lord's own clear and loving light. It is to see what is at stake in the present moment, what direction we need to turn, what step we need to take, what doors are open to us, what dangers threaten us—in short, what this moment means as an integral part of our life's journey.

That is the basic principle behind our practice of beginning our worship services with a time for reflection, a time to call to mind what has been going on in our lives, our minds, and our hearts, of what we are expecting in the coming week, to be mindful of the people we depend on and the people who depend on us, to be aware both of our immediate needs and of our gifts. The assumption is that the Lord is offering us the guidance and support that we need, doing so with the incredible beauty of infinite love and the incredible precision of infinite wisdom. The image comes to mind of a pebble striking the exact center of a pond, and of us as usually somewhere off center, affected by the ripples that come from one side or another of that center. The closer we are to the center, the more clearly we see the whole pattern.

If we think of the experiences of Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, the disciples, and John, though, they stand out as exceptional and infrequent. They come at major turning points, and most of the story takes place in between those turning points. In much the same way, our lives have their daily and weekly twists and turns, ups and downs, and it is only rarely that we have the feeling that we have reached a decisive turning point. The most perfect and poignant example of this is the Lord's life on earth. He spent his entire ministry living for those he loved, devoting his life to them in teaching and preaching and healing; and it was this daily "laying down his life" that enabled him to lay it down decisively, once and for all, when the time came for the crucifixion.

So for us, too, most of the story takes place in between the turning points. We might think of them as crossroads spaced out at wide intervals in the geography of our spiritual journey, crossroads that we will never reach if we do not travel the ground between them. In that sense, there is hardly a more important question than that first one, "Where are you?"

In theological terms, this is the question of the self-examination that is the necessary precursor to the repentance that is the necessary precursor to reformation of life that is the necessary foundation of regeneration. Here there are two statements from our theology that at first sight seem to contradict each other. The first is from *Secrets of Heaven* 8391: "Those who are living a life of faith practice repentance daily." The second is from *Revelation Unveiled* 224: "Repentance is examining oneself once or twice a year."

Actually, these can be seen to complement each other. The first without the second might seem to call for a life of incessant navel-gazing, constant self-conscious self-critique. The second without the first might seem to call for six- or twelve-month spans of heedlessness punctuated by brief orgies of self-flagellation. Together they offer a picture of normal immersion in the business of living responsibly, with times taken periodically to step back and take time for a wider and deeper view. To use an accounting metaphor, a business needs to keep careful track of its finances on a daily basis, and to close the books for audit once a year. The two practices reinforce each other.

The weekly "where are you" of our worship services focuses on the little ups and downs of the week. Is there perhaps a way we could support the practice of asking ourselves this question from a wider perspective? The obvious season for doing this would be the

season of Lent, and each of us might give thought to what would be most helpful in this regard. During that season, we may use our reflection times to step back

If we are to engage in this "repentance once or twice a year," though, the foundation needs to be laid in the practice of repentance daily. This is because the whole purpose of repentance is a life of use. That is where the rubber hits the road—not in what we think of ourselves, not in what we believe theologically, but in how we are treating each other and ourselves day after day. The Sabbath of rest is meaningless unless it enriches the six days of labor.

Amen.

### ***Heaven and Hell 479***

All heaven is differentiated into communities on the basis of differences in the quality of love, and every spirit who is raised up into heaven and becomes an angel is taken to the community where her or his love is. When we arrive there we feel as though we are in our own element, at home, back to our birthplace, so to speak. Angels sense this and associate there with kindred spirits. When they leave and go somewhere else, they feel a constant pull, a longing to go back to their kindred and therefore to their dominant love. This is how people gather together in heaven.