WHAT WE SHALL BE

(The Bible's Greatest Hits II, 4)

Pilgrim Church, Duluth October 23, 1977 Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

I John 3:2. "Beloved, we are God's children now it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him."

I wonder whether this isn't the root of the problem. I mean this hope of being like God. Isn't that where the whole story starts going bad? When the serpent smooth talks Eve in the garden, he says:

> "For God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

That is where all the trouble began, woth this insinuation that God is holding back from us the opportunity to share in his own perception of how things are.

A little further on in the book of Genesis we come to another fascinating story that is told in order to shed some light on the human predicament. We are told that in the olden days there was only one language on earth, one language with a few words. Then as people became more civilized, as they began to establish an urban society on the fertile plain of Babylonia, they said to one another, "Come, let us build a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves." So they built themselves a sort of IDS Building overlooking the river. They were right up there on top of the world, almost as high up as God himself. But God and his associates grew worried. God said, "This is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do now will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down there and confuse their language."

So that is how we got this communication problem. Mutual funds have not done very well since then either.

Ever since then it seems that the Bible itself and the preachers and the theologians have been pointing out to us the danger of becoming too pretentious. "We must remember that we are men and not gods," they constantly remind us. "We must not try to take to ourselves the divine prerogatives. "Pride goeth .....before a fall," and the more skyrocketing the pride the more dismal the fall. Think of what happened to Eve, to the people who built the Tower of Babel, to Ahab and Jezebel and Richard Nixon, and The Beatles, who thought they were bigger than Jesus."

For all these centuries we have been taking in this message and we have tried to remain humble. We have tried to make no claims that we were like God. Nevertheless, from time to time since the dawn of the modern age some of us have begun to wonder a little. Why does God want to keep us down this way? Maybe the serpent was only sowing seeds of distrust, but isn't it a fact that God was holding out on us regarding that tree? And why is he so jealous of our building towers and trying to climb up to where he is?

As people began to ask these questions a Promethean strain entered into our thinking. Prometheus was the Greek Titan who got into trouble with Zeus for teaching people to use fire. The poet Shelley made Prometheus into a hero again and a symbol of modern man's rebellion against the gods. The

Romantic movement celebrated the human capacity to break through all the limits, including those imposed by religion in the name of the deity. Nietzsche said that "God is dead" and that once we find the courage to accept this fact we shall get free of the tyranny that he used to impose on us. As we moved into the second half of the present century even a few somersaulting Christian theologians came to agree.

For so long we let God hem us in. Every time I drive down the New York Thruway and see the remnants of the Erie Canal I am reminded of a statement that a devout Christian supposedly made when that project was about to be ventured.

"If God wanted a river flowing across the state of New York," he said, "he would have put one there."

Well, people put one there and moved the products of the hinterland down into the metropolis and out into all the great ports of the world. The Tower of Babel story seems to say "the sky's the limit." But we have proven that isn't so. We've been to the moon.

The first letter of John says, "Beloved, we are God's children now." But the spirit of the modern world proclaims "man has come of age." That is what Kant remarked two hundred years ago and Dietrich Bonhoeffer echoed him in the letters he wrote from his prison cell during World War II. The swinging theologians of the 1960's caught the echo again. God, they said, should not be a last resort answer we drag in to explain what we cannot explain nor should God be a crutch to lean on when we find we are not up to our responsibilities. . That approach to God won't work anymore. The time has come for us to see that God cheers us on in our building of towers.

Perhaps there was no purer reflection of the mood of that theology than an address given by Gabriel Fackre to one of our church conferences in 1967. He said:

> "In and through the fact of secularization is man's coming of age, his ability to handle his own problems. It is a birthday - and we ought to celebrate it!
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> We ought to celebrate not only because man seems to be in reach of a cure for old illnesses, but also because he is beginning to launch out on his own. That's what should happen when a person reaches his majority. He leaves the warmth of the nest. .....
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> What this means for religion is that man is no longer running to his religious mother and father to do his homework for him or to bail him out when he gets into a jam. He is standing up on his own two feet.[1]

Well, moods change quickly. Already in 1967 Dr. Fackre was riding with currents that were about to scatter against the oncoming tides. Yet behind that mood was a legitimate concern. It was the concern that we get free of the sort of religion that keeps us in a state of childish dependence. It was the concern that we stop worshiping a God who stands against human aspirations for knowledge and know-how and self-fulfillment.

1. "Celebrating God in a Tangled World." Delivered to the annual meeting of the California Conference of the UCC in May 1967 and printed in the autumn 1967 issue of Religion In Life.

I recall so well something that was said to me a year or so later by an active young church woman who served on one of our national boards.

"Why do we have to put down man in order to exalt God?"

I am sure that I did not answer the question satisfactorily. I sensed a false assumption. The traditional Christian attack on the sin of pride is not aimed at putting man down. It is aimed at freeing us from that prison of self-deception that keeps us from becoming truly human. But I sensed too that Charlene's complaint rose from a true perception. There has been much in our piety and sometimes in our theology that glories too much in downgrading humanity for the apparent sake of exalting divinity. I suspect that in a perverse way this tendency too is an expression of human pride.

So then there seems to be a message rooted in the Bible that our main trouble is that we want to be like God. The Old Testament draws upon ancient myths which say that the gods are jealous of our human aspirations. Against this message the modern spirit cries out. This spirit seeks liberation from all the age-old notions that put down our humanity. Modern atheism is rooted in this quest for liberation.

Yet perhaps we have mistaken the Bible. It is the serpent, after all, not God himself, who suggests that God is restricting us unfairly. In the beginning the Bible has God saying "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Far from desiring that we be as unlike him as possible, it appears that God intended from the outset that we be very much like him in the most essential way.

But what way is that? The Tower of Babel story reminds us that we continually seek to be like God from a pagan perspective, not a biblical one. For these ancient Babylonians, as for us modern missile launchers, being like God means getting the power and the glory. It means "making a name for ourselves" and lording it over the earth. That this impulse in human nature leads to breakdowns in human communications is sufficiently documented by human history, I think. We hardly need the old myth to bring the truth home.

God does not begrudge us our advances in technology. The harvesting of crops, the building of cities, the digging of mines and the construction of fast-moving chariots are achievements celebrated in the Bible. God enters into the joy of human achievement there, even though we run into warnings about putting too much reliance on such things.

Yet our destiny from the Bible's perspective is that we should become like God not so much in power and in glory as in character. "Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, 'You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.'" [1] That is the background against which we need to see the affirmation of Christian destiny that comes near the end of the Bible in 1st John, chapter three:

> "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

This little passage is remarkable both in what it says and what it does not say. What we do not find here is any attempt to describe what Reinhold

1. Leviticus 19:2.

Niebuhr called, "the furniture of heaven." There is no effort to picture how things are "on the other side." On the contrary, we find here a marked reserve, a healthy agnosticism respecting the details of life to come. Indeed, John does not speak directly of life after death at all. He speaks only of the goal of our humanity. Harps, clouds, lollypop mountains, what it will be like to see Aunt Sally again, forget all that.

"It does not yet appear what we shall be."

One thing, however, this author does claim to know. "When he appears we shall be like him." Evidently he is speaking of God. It is possible that the "him" refers to Christ. Either way, however, the whole context and setting of John's words reveal that he means that we shall be like the God whom Christ reveals. That is to say, we shall be like God not by building higher and higher towers in the heavens, but by going around on earth doing good.

"When he appears we shall be like him."

In the end people become like that to which they aspire. I have always felt that Hawthorne's story, "The Great Stone Face" is a parable of that truth. The old New Hampshire farmer dreams of a local prophecy coming true. He looks to the day when some hometown boy will grow up, become a great man and turn out to resemble the noble features carved by nature on the side of a nearby mountain. One by one a series of hometown heroes return and are hailed by the populace as fulfilling the prophecy. Initially only Ernest the farmer perceives that these celebrities are just selfish men who have become rich and famous. In the end other people come to that perception too. Then they discover that the prophecy has been fulfilled by one who has lived among them all along. Ernest himself has grown into the image of the great stone face. Both in appearance and in character he has become a replica of that granite visage he has been looking up to every day of his life.

Some insight of that sort lies behind John's thought that the vision of God brings out the image of God in us. From the dawn of history people have wanted to be like the gods. They have gathered huge armies and set out to conquer the world so that they could be like the gods. They have built huge monuments so that they could be like the gods. They have achieved marvelous scientific discoveries and magnificent works of art so that they could be like gods. And again and again people agreed - for a while, they agreed. "Alexander is great," they said. "He is like God." "Augustus is noble", they said, "he is like God." And a few of the intelligentsia who scorned mass opinion, even said, "Plato is brilliant" and "Archimedes is a genius. They are like gods, assuming of course, there were any gods to be like, which of course there aren't, but nevertheless, assuming there were we would aver without qualification that....."

Then out of an obscure village came a peasant man who lived and died, a man named Jesus. And some people began to say, "He is like God. He taught us that we are God's children now. It does not yet appear what we shall be, but if we keep his image before us we know that in the end we shall be like him."

If there is anything more to be said about human destiny, we may leave it for those with special information on such matters. For John this is enough and so it ought to be for all who share his vision of what God is really like.