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Sermon—27Jan19

Lk. 3

“The Doors of Perception”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Some of you may be familiar with the words I have used for the title of this sermon: “The Doors of Perception”. This phrase is also the title of a book published in 1954 by Aldous Huxley.

Huxley was a British writer who lived in California after the Second World War: he was one of the early experimenters with psychedelic drugs. He came to believe that these drugs allowed him to see onto the depths of reality.

Huxley felt that the “doors” of metaphysical perception had been opened for him. As a result, he was able to grasp profound truths about the universe.

Huxley and other drug-takers felt that they were getting the same visions that religious mystics had received through the ages – without of course bothering with the years of prayer and meditation and self-discipline that the mystics needed!

Today, or course, we are more aware of the physical risks of such experiments. Even drug takers themselves rarely claim that their habit is a shortcut to spiritual wisdom!

But Aldous Huxley’s example does point to the value of mysticism. Mystics try to approach the divine through their inner experience and their contemplation and their concentrated patterns of thought.

In fact, mystical experience and vision has been a part of our Judeo-Christian tradition from its beginnings. We may take as an example, the remarkable Psalm, number 139.

This Psalm reflects the most profound experiences of God; who God is; how God appears to us; who we are as creatures of God.

The writer of the Psalm is profoundly aware of how the divine transcends the physical world. Thus, the Psalmist, in addressing God, observes that “Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike.”

Now our observation of the physical world is limited. The human eye depends on light; if there is too little light, we can’t see.

But for God, the amount of light is “immaterial.” God perceives things as they are – without needing eyes – or the light that eyes require.

To a modern person, this philosophical point about the nature of God suggests another idea: God perceives the world in a completely objective way.

God can’t be prejudiced by human stereotypes or racial profiles; God isn’t affected by the emotions of the moment.

And this aspect of God shapes our own relationship with the divine. Free from physical limitations, God can understand us just as we are – “warts and all,” the good bits and the not-so-good bits.

As the Psalmist says, “You have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar.”

But this Psalm is about more than abstract theology. Because God has this nature we need never fear being alone. God is with us. Nor should we fear that we won’t be “understood,” for God can search us out, and know us, and understand just exactly what we’re struggling with. A clergyman in a novel by another British writer, Margery Allingham, remarks: “The 139th Psalm is the only one if you’re frightened.”

For besides having infinite knowledge of creation, God also has infinite power and love. So God is able to do something about what he sees. God doesn't simply observe the world; God is intimately involved in what happens here.

To me, this is an even more important revelation than the idea that God "discerns my thought from afar." For God's knowledge, power and love together means that God is in control of the universe. And that means he's in control of my universe.

As the Psalmist says, "If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand hold me fast".

Obviously God's control isn't total. Human beings are given freedom to do good or evil in a world with immense challenges to our freedom.

But even though we're free, and we can act contrary to God's intentions, nevertheless, there is something immensely calming about those ideas. Even if, as the Psalm says, "such knowledge is too wonderful for me, it is so high that I cannot attain it" – even so, this majestic vision of God can calm our most personal fears.

The vision is, as the Psalmist says, "wonderful". Worries, we certainly have in life – but not the worry about "how things will turn out." Worries we have, but not worries about our destiny.

For God sees through to the heart of things. And at the heart of things God places his own spirit.

You might have noticed a slight change in the invocation I said at the beginning of this sermon. I offered the sermon "in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer."

"Sustainer" is a term sometimes used to refer to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Theologians claim that God "sustains" the world to the extent that if God ceased to support creation it would collapse into nothingness.

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me:" "Wonderful" in the sense that it causes me to marvel at the nature of the universe.

Ancient historians used to refer to "the Seven Wonders of the World" – like the largest pyramid. Today we might think of the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls.

These natural "wonders" seem incredible but for Christians they are signs of the infinite God who created them.

Modern people also could add to the list of "wonders" the countless discoveries of science. But here, too, the writer of Psalm 139 has already had the same idea!

For the Psalmist says to God: "you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb."

And isn't it true that medical science continues to discover new things about the human body. Even though our learning today is vastly greater than it once was, biologists are very far from having reached a complete understanding of human beings.

If anything, the body now appears more amazing than it did thousands of years ago when the Psalms were written. To us, science opens the same doors of perception that the mystics of past ages have entered.

Mystic knowledge is not only about God; it is also about human beings. About us human beings who are understood and protected and sustained and guided by the God who is always with us.

As the Psalmist wrote, "If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand will hold me fast."

And now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion and praise, now and forever, Amen.