

(instrumental music) (clears throat)

- Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, oh God, father, son and Holy Spirit, be acceptable in thy sight. Amen. (clears throat) Thanks to the mass media, religious issues have lately become table talk, and theology or something like it is a sort of tinder for animated discussion of the household. Not for some time, I think, has God talk received such space in the public press. Hopefully, it might have been better informed, both in its sources and in its journalistic vehicles. But such as it is, we have it, and God, or some kind of fact similarly, is receiving unaccustomed attention. The issue that is being aired and kicked around might perhaps be stated thus, whether God is a hypothesis of which we have longer any need. And of course, the answer is that this depends upon what we are attempting to explain, to understand, or to render intelligible. Laplace, the 18th century French physicist was probably right in his mechanistic application of Newtonian gravitational theory to the solar system. He did not have need of God's intrusive power to explain the phenomenon. Given the Newtonian principles, he had enough data to explain all the operations and effects within the range of his prevailing interest. Now, while the prevailing interests may vary, it is very much the same, I think, with the earthbound and mundane among us whose whole preoccupation centers in buying and selling, in fabricating and using. Within this range of interests and endeavor, of goods and services, of supply and demand, the God hypothesis can and does become tenuous and often irrelevant. Not finely perhaps, but rather decisively. At length, men find themselves the solitary centers and in a limited sense, the sufficient cause of their own world, that is, the world of their own making, the made world. If they must accept also the social character of their existence within this universe of goods and services, of utilities and competitive claims, then salvation consists in contriving the greatest good for the greatest number of claimants. Social control becomes the instrument and the planned or perhaps the great society offers itself as a sort of substitute for the dissolving face of God. In such a system too, the words of Laplace apply. Sire, I have no need of that hypothesis. That is, for my present purposes. In short, I think we ought all to understand that for certain purposes and from frequently occupied perspectives, it is quite possible to entertain often imperceptibly and unwittingly a kind of practical and practicing atheism. It is simply that from some vantage points, as indeed Francis Bacon long ago knew and said, "God is not a useful hypothesis from some vantage points." From quite a different perspective and with the poet's eye for human interests and values, words worth voiced his misgivings about the shape of 19th century mercantile English society and complaint. The world is too much with us late and so. Getting and spending, we lay waste our power. Little there is in nature that is ours. For this and for everything we are out of tune, we have given our hearts away assorted boom. Great God, I'd rather be a pagan suckled in a creed out war. So might I standing on this pleasantly have visions that would make me last for long, have sight of Proteus rising from the sea, or hear all Triton blow his wreathed horn. Now, in the Psalmist, standing under the night sky on some escapement of Judean Hills contemplated the vast canopy of heavens and contrasted the puniness of man with the splendor and majesty of the creator. You might say he got things into perspective, but we quite miss the Psalmist point. Unless we understand that the movement of his thought was not from heaven to earth, from this idea of splendor to the human frame, quite the reverse. The

God of the Psalmist was first of all the God of Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses and prophets, and Psalmist before this Psalms. God was first known in his visitation with man. He was first known in his approach to man in a kind of divine human encounter, such as an an encounter his God had with Moses at Sinai, or with Elijah on Mount Horeb, with Amos at Tekoa, or Isaiah in the temple. These men, as we view them in retrospect, were the human instruments, the harps of the human mind and spirit, the harps of God whose strings God picked and made music on, in which go on resounding for those who have ears to hear through the centuries. No, the astonishment and the amazement of the Psalmist is the same that of Augustine and Pascal. Not that I found thee, but that thou first found me. That is the amazement and wonder. What is man that thou are mindful of him, and the son of man that thou visits thee? The problem in our knowledge of God has to do with our controlling interests and perspective. It is the position we occupy. It is the preoccupation of our attention, the direction of our gaze and our predominating look. So, Plato had better be heard again in our time. He likens the lot of the generality of us to men in perpetual bondage. It is the bondage of the cave. Here, men sit and chained with their backs to the light, obsessed and preoccupied by shadows, passing figures, which these men in their ignorance of bondage confound with true realities. Their ignorance is in no way relieved just because they have a complete system of error, coherent and self consistent in itself. Whether for Plato or for Isaiah, the knowledge of God, the attainment of truth about reality requires the emancipation of the whole mind and the whole man. It requires a revolution of perspective, a complete conversion of interest and attention. Thus for Isaiah, the blindness of man to God is in the end, a perversity in the soul, as in Plato, it is a lie in the soul. Therefore, Isaiah says, "Go tell this people, here ye indeed but on understand not, and see ye indeed what ye perceive not." For both Plato and Isaiah then, ignorance of God is inattention, inattention fundamentally to the moral nature of man. It is ignorance of man's own calling. Man does not know who he is. He is deaf to the summons of God. He does not know, as Jesus said, the time of his visitation. His blindness is a moral problem. It is also a problem of improper self-knowledge. He does not know he is a moral being. He is called to responsible existence, but he does not heed. He can only know God in the acceptance of his responsibility to God. And it is for this reason, my friends, that Jesus taught, "Blessed are the pure in heart, the single-minded on God, for they shall see him." Now, some of us, most of the time, and most of us some of the time have trouble about God because in a manner of speaking, we don't look in his direction. Or further, we may look in his direction but we can't discern him because of airing but stubborn preconceptions about God's identity. Often, because of ignorance of our own essential nature is men, we don't know what we're looking for, or even yet again, we don't find God because we look in some place outside us, outside ourselves. God is already partly excluded from his proper place inside ourself. He has been barred from our flabby consciousness, overgrown and obscured by unintentional and intentional neglect. We might have learned from Elijah on Mount Horeb, if we had ever heard of Elijah or Horeb, that God was not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but that God had something to do with a still small voice. The God of the wind, the God of the earthquake, the God of the fire was in a manner of speaking dead with Elijah on Mount Horeb, but the still small voice was alive. It made Elijah a part of that resolute company. And despite the powerful social pressures of the age that would not bow the need to Baal, that is to the conventional gods of the peer group. Knowledge of God, and as opposed to knowledge of the Baals, is a matter of choice. Elijah knew it, and therefore, he called out ringing for decision, "Choose ye this day whom he will serve. If God, serve him, if Baal, him." Elijah knew that when the knee is bowed to the God's of the peer group, men have already cease to he, and therefore, know the God of Abraham. They may hear, but they do not understand. They may see, and yet they do not

proceed. The Baals, the gods of this world, are always with us and never lack our patronage. They're the gods of all sorts of aims and interests, shorts of the final interest and the ultimate concern. They're the gods of gain of affluence, of technological achievement, of some politics and most partisanship. They are the gods of acquisition and comfort, and in some part of the American way of life, especially in its thirst to proffer itself to the world as a divine panacea. These Baals are mammon, and we were long since warned that we cannot serve God and mammon without pleading to the one and despising the other. In short, I say again, the knowledge of God, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, the God of Moses, of Jesus Christ, is in the end a moral choice and there is no evasion of it. You cannot serve God and mammon. But if in the great society, man opt for mammon, for the gods of self maintenance and self enhancement. Then, of course, for them and the trend of their motivation, God is dead. Either men affirm and assert their natures as moral, responsible beings, which means beings under God, or as Saint Paul declared, they worship and serve the Creator, rather than the created. Either they affirm their nature as an image of God, or they acquire the likeness of their idols. As a matter of fact, they create many of us are like Augustine, the sainted Bishop of Hippo who in his younger days prayed, "Lord make me one with thee, make me thy know but not yet." With this same Augustine, after long struggles and resistance, there came a decisive moment. Postponement could sustained no longer. The holdout and evasion was broken through and Augustine declared, "Thou has made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find the rest and leave." This is self knowledge. A divided spirit was resolved in favor of the God by whom Augustine knew himself long to have been visited. His converted soul began a new life under different auspices. Augustine, at length, gave he, and thou accepted the calling, the responsible existence to which all along he had had in suppressible intonations. In him, the still small voice had his way. Or in the metaphor of Francis Thompson, the hound of heaven of relentless feet had overtaken its quarry. For Augustine, it had been true. I fled him down the nights and down the days, I fled him down the arches of the ears, I fled him down the Labyrinthine ways of my own mind. And in the midst of tears, I hid from him, and under running laughter up fisted hopes I sped and shot precipitated the down Titanic blooms of chasm fears from those strong feet that followed after. But with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy they beat, and a voice beat more instant than the feet. All things betrays thee who betrays me. Read Francis Thompson's Hound of Heaven. And I wager that you may come to understand more about the way of knowledge of God in its birthing and in its delivery, than many books of theology will disclose, and you may come to share the insight of the saints in all ages that the knowledge of God is not doing so much as it is receiving, that it is less an achievement than a gift, less a searching than a being found, less a capturing than a being overtaken, and above all, less annoying than as St. Paul said, a being no. You may learn that first of all, the knowledge of God is squaring up with yourself, leveling with your own inmost nature. Or you may learn that it is a congruence between your real being and your essential aspirations and highest calling. You may even come to see or better to understand with Socrates, with St. Paul, with Augustine, with Pascal, and with Francis Thompson, that the surest sign of God's presence is just the absence of that faithful and dismaying contradiction between the good that we would, as Paul said, and the evil that we do, even if it is only complicity in so little things as mean innuendo of insinuating words about our friends. So it is that most of the time we look for the tokens of God's presence in the wrong place and in the wrong direction. They're not, first of all, in the heavens. The Psalmist knew they are first of all in ourselves and must be honored. Most of us some of the time turn to the world without, rather than to the inward human world, to that battleground of the soul where the struggle between good and evil, between right and wrong, between

faithfulness and unfaithfulness is forever waged. Here, in the warfare soul, is the surety of the divine presence. Here it is that the triumph, the righteousness in us is the passing into existence of the being of God, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, man. That is why in Jesus Christ, in the final triumphs of the divine righteousness, God is truly fully and finally manifest. He is manifest in a personal life. So in Christ, the author of Hebrews, in the text that was not read this morning, finds also the answer to the Psalmist searching query, "What is man in the perfect obedience of Christ? Is man's answer about his own and real identity?" Do we remember that we are in this Easter season, as Christians, invited to share in Christ likeness, share his victory, and partake of his righteousness? And when we do and in the measure that we do, God is present to us and then manifest among us. This is what the Christian community is supposed to be, a vehicle of the presence of God, for God is present in the shape, structure, the radiance of human lives that are becoming living sacrifices, that is, vehicles of his grace. And listen, God's eternal being, in itself unfathomable and incomprehensible, becomes existence and comprehensible in Jesus Christ. If you wish to say so, but in a figure of speech, God is alive in Christ holy. Yet it is better to say simply that God is manifest. So also again, in a figure of speech, God who is not manifest in life, in the lives of men, in the lives of the faithful may still in a figure be spoken of his dead. But in truth, this only means his eternal being is not manifest in us or among us. He does not yet have existence in us, in our time, in our society, in our nation, and perhaps not in our churches or in ourselves. God's essence, his eternal being, has not become existence in historical time. This is what is meant by complaining in an unfamiliar and dismaying and shocking idiom that God is dead. Then the complaint is as old as Isaiah, as true as Christ, and as Orthodox Saint Paul or Saint Augustine. But if this is so, then the complaint is pointing fingers at the wrong party. It is not God for whom the Baal told, it is man, from whom so, the life of God is shut out by man's own doing. But man is not abandoned in his waywardness, in his flight from God. We may flee him down the nights and down the days, evade him in the labyrinthine ways of our minds and hide from him under running laughter, we may flee from those strong feet that follow after, yet with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy they beat, and a voice beat more instant than the feet, all things betray thee, who betrayest me. My friends, if I am not mistaken, in our time, we have found with near utter certainty that all things do betray us. May it not be time to stop running and be overtaken of God. Amen. So be it. Let us pray. (soft instrumental music) Now I want to hear who is eternal, immortal, invisible, the only just and all wise God, be glory and honor, dominion and power, now and forever. And may the blessing of God almighty, father, son and Holy Spirit pursue you and be amongst you, and abide ever with you. Amen. (liturgical music)