CALLED OF GOD
by Lester J. Start
Undated

“Suddenly the Lord passed by . . . . and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so when Elijah heard it. . . . . And the Lord said unto him, Go . . . .”

I have read this passage because it gives us a picture of a God who commands and summons, calls and sends. “And the Lord said . . . Go.” I want to speak to you about that this morning - about the divine summons that comes to us as ministers, - a summons to speak for God, to sound for Him the insistent call to high and noble endeavor, a summons which, all too often, as the years go by, becomes little more than the tarnished badge of a calling that is no longer real.

That this call to be a spokesman for God in the life of the world loses its reality for many of us goes almost without saying. Subtly, often unconsciously, the passing years take their toll until finally what was a compelling urgency is no more than a wistful memory of youthful eagerness and devotion. We become, to use the picturesque language of Dick Sheppard, little ecclesiastical janitors, from whose lips come the soothing sound of the flute rather than the stirring up the last of the trumpet. The Lord no longer speaks, he whispers; he no longer commands, he suggests; he no longer summons, he tips his hat and says by-your-leave. If you are not too busy, perhaps you can spare me a little time, a few minutes before you go to bed, or even a word over your shoulder while you gulp your lunch. I’m a pleasant, agreeable fellow; not too demanding; my preachers don’t preach too long and the music is lovely, why not give me an hour a week? It won’t do you any harm, and it may even do you some good.

No wonder vast numbers of people are disillusioned with regard to the churches. The great mass of mankind is listening for a different voice to issue from the pulpits - a bold, demanding, rousing voice - a voice that will stand men and women upon their feet and set them marching toward a “city, which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” In Eric Knight’s This Above All, a British soldier just back from Dunkirk, says to the victor of an English village church:

You’ve been nice, padre, and so - I’ll repay you. I’ll give you something - something rare. Truth! A common man’s truth that is precious, for it may bring you understanding of us.

You say I am looking for something in which to have faith. It is true. I and millions like me. And now ask yourself why it is that we scorn to look for a focus of that faith in your church.

Because your church has shown not the least understanding of the horrible morass in which we common men wade. So your churches are empty, and yes, we go in our millions to cinema houses, theaters, football matches. Why? Because by my eternal soul those things, warped and poor as they are, are nearer to God and the common man’s need for Him than your church with its timid fears.
Your church has lived in terror for generations. Terror. All the multiple and beautiful teachings of Christ you have thrown away, because you know they would offend the rich and privileged . . . To cover the lack you have put into the church of Christ the jewel-laden trappings and pomp He never knew and could never love. . . .

Give them up! Follow Christ once more! Rise up from your terror . . . Come back into our lives as we live them today . . .

We did not leave you. You left us. . . . We are waiting, nearly forty millions of us in this land, for you to give the church back to us!

“Follow Christ once more!” God pity us when it takes a disturbed novelist to plead with us to do that.

One factor in the soft-pedaling of divine imperatives is the place of peculiar temptation in which the minister stands. On the one hand, he is the spokesman for stern ethical realities which rise from the ordinary level of living like mountain peaks at the edge of a plain; on the other hand, he is the responsible head of an institution with all the problems that involve the realm of personal relationships. On the one hand, he has been called to speak the words of “the high and lofty one who inhabiteth eternity”, on the other hand, he feels that he must say nothing that will disturb the saints at rest in their pews. And the Christian gospel is disturbing, and because it is disturbing it is dangerous when one thinks in terms of smoothly functioning ecclesiastical machinery.

Inevitably, simply because he is the administrator of an institution, the minister at times must assume the role of peace-maker within the life of the institution he serves, but he may go so far in his peace-making as to negate the very ends for which the institution was created. In the attempt to make everyone feel at ease in Zion, he may take stern ethical realities and turn them into comfortable sing-song. In his endeavor to be agreeable and good-hearted, taking as his text Paul’s words about being all things to all men, he may end up by being nothing to everyone. What he calls peace-making in the interests of God, may turn out to be unconditional surrender to the lack of vision and to the prejudices of his congregation. Ultimately he may find himself in the contemptible role of a modern vicar of Bray. Or as the popular ballad put it:

With the vicar of Bray, according to tradition, was an English cleric who gained notoriety by his ability to hang onto his benefices during all the changes of authority in English religion. He was a Papist under Henry VIII, a Protestant under Edward, a Papist again under Mary, and once more became a Protestant under Elizabeth. When he was reproached for being a turn-coat and accused of being a man without principle, he replied: “Not so, for if I changed my religion, I am sure that I have kept true to my principle which is to live and die the vicar of Bray.”

This is the law that I’ll maintain.

Until my dying day, Sir.

That what so ever King shall reign,
Still I’ll be the vicar of Bray, Sir.

That is the perennial temptation of the minister - to elevate expediency to a principle, to silence the high summons that once was ours, and to transform the voice of the high and lofty One into an empty echo of voices from the pews.

A second factor in muffling the clear word of moral guidance which one has a right to expect from the pulpit is rooted in an evaluation of the contemporary scene. Here it is not a matter of expediency but a question of possibility. Here the moral imperatives of the Christian gospel are not regarded as dangerous but as futile, impractical, irrelevant, and without pertinence to the mundane sphere in which we live. For in the general disillusionment of our age many have come to regard the ethical teachings of Jesus as heavenly principles designed for the heavenly kingdom, but not susceptible to application in this evil world.

It is evident that we are not living in a very hopeful generation. The time of easy optimism, of shortcuts to progress, of a glib rationalizing of our own desires and a naive confidence in man is gone. The events of our day have seen to that. We are a disillusioned people, and it does not surprise us that we are surrounded on every side by prophets of despair. What does surprise us is that the pessimism of the secular mind has invaded the churches, infected the clergy, and mastered the theologians. We would expect something different from them, for they are the spokesmen for God, the exponents of spiritual forces, the interpreters of eternal realities. Some of you may remember the editorial in Fortune magazine some time ago which dealt with the pessimism and despair that has gripped many of the clergy as the result of two wars, and a depression in one generation. If you are a taxpayer, the editorial said, you have a right to be disillusioned because you’ve lost your money. If you’re a statesman, you have a right to be disillusioned, because you have failed to bring any tangible order out of chaos. But if you are a Christian, and even more if you are a clergyman, you have no right at all. Your grounds are spiritual grounds. You ought to know that the solution to material problems doesn’t lie in the realm of material things. You, above all, ought to know that the struggle of God for His kingdom is a long struggle - a struggle that began with creation - and that in that struggle the loss of one battle is not the loss of the war. God pity us again that it takes a layman to tell us that.

But many of us have surrendered to the temper of the times and have turned the good news of the kingdom into a council of defeat. If and when God speaks, say these men, his voice comes not as a summons to more worthy service, not - as it did to Elijah - as a rebuke for his discouragement and despair, but simply to reveal to us the folly of our endeavor. Hope is an illusion. Progress is a mirage. Resignation is the only virtue. And so they would equate passivity with piety, and suppose that the less they do in the Lord’s name the more they trust Him.

But the man in the street knows better than that. He knows that it makes a difference what he does and what he leaves undone. He may not know what to do. He is confused and bewildered, and he would look to the preacher for words of guidance and direction, but he does not believe that it makes no difference what he does. And he knows that he cannot live without hope; not necessarily the hope that the millennium will dawn, but the reasonable hope that tomorrow can be better than today. He expects to hear those words of hope from the minister, and if the
minister fails him - if the words of guidance and encouragement are lacking - in his bewilderment and despair, he will turn to those who do have a message that is pertinent to this world. If he cannot make his life count for God, he nonetheless will make it count.

An illustration of what this secular pessimistic emphasis in theological thought, carried on long enough, will result in is to be seen in Germany. During the period between the two wars, this emphasis swept through the German churches, silencing the prophetic voice that should have issued from the German pulpits. God was in His heaven and He was there to stay. The devil was on earth and he was here to stay. Progress was impossible. Programs of social change were an illusion. Resignation was the order of the day. Comfort was to be sought by contemplation of transcendental orthodoxies. The outcome? Need I put it into words? Disappointed by all kinds of Christian leadership, says Martin Dibelius, the people began to look elsewhere for leadership.

No, it won’t do, our muffling the voice of God with his ethical demands and moral requirements, with his words of hope and his insistent summons to action. He waits for us! He waits for us to sound His call.

I wonder how many of us know those lines of Angella Morgan, entitled God Prays? I am going to close with them. They tell a great story.

Last night I tossed and could not sleep.

When sodden heavens weep and weep,
As they have wept for many a day,
One lies awake to fear and pray.
One thinks of bodies blown like hail
Across the sky where angels quail;
One’s sickened pulses leap and hark
To hear the Horror in the dark.

“What is Thy will for the people, God?
Thy will for the people, tell it me!
For War is swallowing up the sod
And still no help from Thee.
Thou who art mighty hast forgot;
And art Thou God or art Thou not?
When wilt Thou come to save the earth
Where death has conquered birth?"
And the Lord God whispered and said to me,
“These things shall be, these things shall be,
Nor help shall come from the scarlet skies
Till the people rise!
Till the people rise, my arm is weak;
I cannot speak till the people speak;
When men are dumb, my voice is dumb -
I cannot come till my people come.”
And the Lord God’s presence was white, so white,
Like a pillar of stars against the night.
“Millions on millions pray to me
Yet hearken not to hear me pray;
Nor comes there any to set me free
Of all who plead from night to day.”
So God is mute and heaven is still
While the nations kill.
“Thy people have travailed much!” I cried.
“I travail even as they,” God sighed.
“I have cradled their woe since the stars were young.
My infant planets were scarcely hung
When I dreamed the dream of my liberty.
And planned a people to utter me.
I am the pang of their discontent,
The passion of their long lament -
I am the purpose of their pain,
I writhe beneath their chain.”

“But Thou art mighty and needs’t no aid.
Can God the infinite be afraid?”

“They too are God yet know it not.
‘Tis they not I who have forgot.
And war is drinking the living sod,”
Said God . . . .

“Help them to stand, O Christ,” I prayed.

“They people are feeble and sore afraid.”

“My people are strong,” God whispered me,

“Broad as the land, great as the sea;
They will tower tall as the tallest skies,
Up to the level of my eyes.
When they dare to rise.

. . . . .

They are my mouth, my breath, my soul!
I wait their summons to make me whole.”
All night I toss and I cannot sleep;
When shattered heavens weep and weep

As they have wept for many days.

I know, at last, ’tis God, who prays.

If we want to, as the spokesmen for God in the life of the world, we can play a great part in answering his prayer.