

The Holy Trinity

May 27, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

FIRST READING: (Isaiah 6: 1-8)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of
hosts;

the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

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The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 3: 1-17)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

As I said before, today is Trinity Sunday. But don't worry. I'm not going to stand up here and talk for fifteen minutes about a doctrine that nobody really understands. I would rather talk about an experience of the Living God. I'm going to start today with a prayer from Walter Brueggemann's book, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted to Earth.* And he has titled this prayer, *"And then you."*

"We arrange our lives as best we can,
to keep your holiness at bay

Safe, virtuous, settled.

And then you –

you and your dreams,
you and your visions,
you and your purposes,
you and your commands,
you and our neighbors.

We find your holiness not at bay,
but probing, pervading,
insisting, demanding.

And we yield, sometimes gladly,
sometimes resentfully,
sometimes late . . . or soon.

We yield because you, beyond us, are our God.

We are you creatures met by your holiness,
and by your holiness made our true selves.

And we yield. Amen.¹

"We yield because you, beyond us, are our God." That's never more true than in the Sixth Chapter of Isaiah. Today, I'd like to walk through that story that was read in the First Reading to see what we can learn from it. If you're a visual type, open up your bulletin.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann* (Kindle Locations 124-128). Kindle Edition.

It begins, "*In the year that King Uzziah died.*" Pretty sure that was 742 BC. But that's not what Isaiah is talking about. Think about it this way:

Have you ever been at a point in your life when you were feeling like everything was falling apart? Your business was going under, or your relationship was going sour. You were flunking math class, or your team was in last place. You know what I mean? And I'm suspecting we've all been there at some point, when everything feels like it's falling apart.

And when you're there, at some point you probably have said, "It was all going great until . . ." "The project was going great until we got distracted by that thing." "Life was good, until I hurt my back." "My kid was fine until they started hanging out with . . ." whoever. We can put our finger on what went wrong. We know what changed everything.

And so it was with the year that King Uzziah died. It was fine in Judea, until Uzziah died. Uzziah was a good, no, he was a great leader. Forty years of peace, prosperity, unity. He even ruled his last ten years in isolation because he had leprosy. And he kept things going just fine. But then he died. And his son Jotham wasn't able to keep it together for even three years, before he was deposed by his son Ahaz. Ahaz, that's a king we know about. A particularly bad king, who sold Judea out to Assyria and set them on the course to finally be destroyed by Babylon. Yes, it was all fine, until the year that King Uzziah died.

I find it interesting that Isaiah holds these two things together – the year that King Uzziah died – the year everything started falling apart – he holds that against the mystery and glory of God. He starts with this failure of human institutions. Isaiah actually spends the five chapters complaining about how awful things have gotten. And it was in the context of that awfulness that he sees the vision of the throne of God.

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple." Can you picture this? The hem of his robe filled the temple. Notice that our chancel here is about two stories. The temple was about twenty stories. The hem of his robe filled the temple. So big.

And the seraphim are flying around. The seraphim were giant, serpent-like fire things. I know, this whole thing is starting to sound a little bit like a bad science fiction movie. Right? But, remember, these were images of transcendence and glory in the Eighth Century BC.

Can we find a sense of holiness or transcendence or something beyond us in this generation? Can you imagine something that is fierce in its beauty and scale? Maybe unending stars on a clear summer night. Or the untamed power of the ocean. The fury of a summer storm. The immensity of the redwoods. Awe and wonder. Can we find that sense of wonder anymore? Or are we so focused on what we can explain, what we can control, so that there is no longer room for mystery or transcendence?

Like Brueggemann wrote,

*“We arrange our lives as best we can
to keep your holiness at bay”*

“And then you —

*you and your dreams,
you and your visions,
you and your purposes,
you and your commands”*

God breaks into our certainties and shows us what is really true, what is really glorious. We catch a glimpse of that every once in awhile. Say, in the eyes of a newborn, or in forgiveness given, or in an act of pure love and sacrifice. And just for a moment, we know. We know there is something more than what we can control, more beautiful than what we can create. More real than what we can prove.

That moment, that vision, is what Isaiah experiences, and it leaves him lost. You know, it’s a bit of a shock to the ego when you realize you’re not the center of the universe. It’s humbling to recognize that, yes, we are a mere speck in all of creation. And Isaiah cries out, *“I am a man of unclean lips.”* Today, that might be translated, “I am not enough”. “I am not smart enough, or good and virtuous enough, or influential enough.” “I am not spiritual enough.” Or any of the other lies we tell ourselves.

It is a grace, then, that the seraphim come with fire to burn those words away. It’s the same grace that happens when the community of believers comes with baptismal water, to wash away what is not true, and lifts us up as children of God. The community proclaims, “In Christ you are enough. You are beautiful. You are loved. You are gifted. You are known.” This one who is mysterious and vast and uncontrolled – this God knows you, and loves you, and gives you real life worth living.

Isaiah is given the grace to know he is enough in God’s eyes. So when God says, “Who can I send and who will go for us?” this little voice, way down in the shadows, says, *“Here am I; send me!”*

It always reminds me of that scene in the Lord of the Rings when the leaders of nations are arguing about who can go and destroy the one ring. And then little Frodo comes up and says, “I will take the ring, though I do not know the way.”

Frodo was the right one. Isaiah was the right one. We are each the right one, at the right time, sent out to love greatly, or forgive mightily, or build community, or speak for the voiceless, or hold the hand of someone who has not yet encountered the grace of God and what is real. We are in this world for a purpose. We are beautiful, and loved, and gifted, and sent.

But today I would like to end the way I began, with the prayer, "*And then you.*"

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