A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“On to Ordinary Time”*

Isaiah 6:1-8

Trinity Sunday

May 27, 2018

The prophet Isaiah, before he was the prophet Isaiah and was just Isaiah, finds himself in a vision in the temple in the immediate and direct presence of the living God. Just pause over that scenario for a moment. Tom Long tells of a pastor who was praying over a small child, a two year old. The pastor said something very pastor-like such as, “You belong to God this day and forever more.” Just then the child exclaimed, “Uh-oh.” Exactly. Uh-oh, to be in the true presence of God when you’re people like Isaiah and his people, or people like us.

The first five chapters of the book of Isaiah describe what kind of people they are. They have forgotten and forsaken the Lord, their worship is futile, their leaders are corrupt. Greed fuels injustice toward the earth, which they plunder, and the poor, whom they trod down by their insatiable desire to accumulate more, more, always more, like a person who eats and is never satisfied. That’s who they are as a people. Uh-oh.

Over their rotten lives, they have spread a thin patina of righteousness. They have their worship services, their songs, and keep the liturgical calendar of holy days, but it does not change who they are on the inside: “They do not regard the deeds of the Lord or see the work of his hands (5:12).” You can get away with doing life this way for a while, sometimes for a long while. A little bit of religion goes a long way.

At least a little religion goes a long way if your desire is to feel good about yourself, to be affirmed in who you are. We all like that, and a little bit of religion is unparalleled in its ability to give that. A little dab of religion works wonders on bruised egos, telling us we are loved, we are beautiful, we are wanted. If you just want to hear those things, a little religion is just the medicine.

If you want the truth, I mean the real truth, about the world, about yourself and your community, a little religion won’t do it, but an encounter with the living God will open your eyes.

That’s where Isaiah found himself and I wonder if he wanted to moonwalk back out of the room when he realized where he was. This was not going to be a nibble of religious self-justification. Isaiah found himself in the temple, with seraphim angels, in the presence of the Lord. Isaiah knew well what they all knew and wrote about all through scripture. A little bit of God is safe. But you don’t really want to see God’s face. To see God face-to-face is to face certain death. To think you can see God’s face and live is hubris. Even Moses’ face was veiled; even Elijah only saw God’s back as he passed by. In the presence of the one true God, you better be careful.

Even the angels are humble before God, covering their faces in the divine presence.

Here’s what we see with startled Isaiah, “The Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple.” This is a subtly wonderful gesture to God’s grandeur. The temple in Jerusalem was the place where God was supposed to reside and God does stay there, if your god is small enough. But this God will not be contained, not by the temple, not by religious observances, not by human hubris, not by human self-satisfaction. God is bigger, grander, more awesome than they even knew. The Old Testament writers were humble in their vocabulary for God. Instead of just throwing around **God** like it was a beanbag in cornhole like we’re want to do, they were careful, modest, respectful. It is always God’s name, or God’s presence. Scholars call it circumlocution, when you say something in a round-about way instead of being blunt about it. In scripture it’s a sign of respect.

Biblical writers were modest and respectful not to use God’s name in vain, in vulgarity, or silliness. Isaiah’s description may be the most beautiful of all of those circumlocutions. He doesn’t stand there and gawk wildly at us, “Golly, God is really big.” No, this is better. It’s one of the great lines in all scripture, “the hem of God’s robe filled the temple.” I know you see it in your minds, but it bears whispering out loud, “if the hem, the tassel of the robe of God can fill the temple, O Lord our Lord how majestic is your name in all the earth.” That’s what Isaiah feels, and you get the sense he doesn’t lift his eyes from the hem of the robe filling the temple.

That’s what we see. Here is what we hear, the song of angels singing praise, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord, the whole earth is full of his glory.” Thrice-holy for a God in three persons. That’s the song we hear.

Here’s what we feel, the searing heat of a burning coal. The angels, whose name is fire, carry this coal with tongs. With it they purify Isaiah’s lips, and his whole being.

It is with this vision in our eyes, the searing of purification heat on our lips, the smell of smoke in our nostrils, and the sound of “Holy, Holy, Holy” that we move today from the worship services, songs, and liturgical calendar of Easter and Pentecost into ordinary time, joining Isaiah as ministers in God’s world.

Easter and Pentecost are high and holy liturgical be-templed seasons in the church year. I hope you’ve felt that. I really do. I hope it’s been more than a little dollop of religion, penetrated deeper than patina spread thin over your life. I hope your heart has been lifted up. I hope your prayers have been inspired and that you have felt yourself embraced in the presence of the living God through the Son by the Holy Spirit. I hope God seems a little bigger and a little closer this year. I hope you know God as a little more awesome and a little more loving this year. I hope you’ve found a few more words to say about and to God in prayer; I hope you’ve found yourself speechless and silent. I hope you’ve loved the community of faith a little more; I hope you’ve sought solitude with a little more courage.

These seasons, marked by the music, the stories, the colors in the sanctuary, the artwork, have been beautiful. We even just about knocked the electricity out of the place last Sunday! Easter and Pentecost seasons capstone most of the liturgical drama going all the way back to the first Sunday of Advent. It’s about half the year. In my office I have a wall-hanging of a church calendar as a circle. Each liturgical season of the year has its own color. About half the circle, the top half, is a rainbow of colors: purple, green, purple, blue, red, yellow. The bottom half of the circle is all green. It’s about half and half. We stand today between the drama in the liturgical year and the ordinary in the liturgical year.

What better way to go than with this vision in our eyes of God’s grandeur, this feeling in our hearts of God’s purifying grace, this angelic song in our ears of God’s holiness. This Trinity Sunday of God’s essence. So, what do we do now?

Well, we could follow Isaiah’s lead.

“Woe is me! I am a person of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Isaiah’s confession is personal but not just individualistic, and it is communal but not just sociological. Get what I mean? We have a tendency to confess sin as if it’s just individualistic or we swing the other way and think of people as only passive products of their environment. Isaiah models the true confession. I am a person of unclean lips; I dwell among a people of unclean lips. It’s both personal and communal. Racism is like that: it’s personal and structural. Violence is like that: it's a twisting of the individual human heart and the manifestation of societal failures. I think all human reality is like this: I am who I am because it’s who I am, and because of who I’m with. It’s nature and nurture; it’s personal and corporate. What it is mostly is a prompting to be humble and confessional. A little bit of religion makes you feel better about yourself compared to who you once were or could have been, or who other people turned out to be. That’s what a little bit of religion gets you. A little religion makes you proud and defensive of your heritage, culture, and community. But a glimpse of God’s presence, when your eyes have glimpsed the glory of the Lord, it unmasks who you really are; it shows where brokenness goes all the way down and is woven through the human systems that we depend on and help create. When we see true goodness, our eyes are opened to what is not yet truly good. Be humble. Tell the truth. Confess sin. Trust God. That’s our first response to God’s glory, and the way to move into the rest of the year: seek more and more of God that you may know more and more the truth of yourself and ourselves.

Then, answer the call. Isaiah saw the hem of the robe of the Lord. The angels sang of the glory of the Lord. Now Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?”

And without missing a beat. Without even waiting for the biblical editor to mark the beginning of a new verse, Isaiah’s hand shoots in the air, “Here am I! Send me!” Isaiah became prophet Isaiah, anointed by God to call his people back to their relationship with their God.

Let this prayer be on our lips every day with the same eagerness. Here am I! Send me! Send me where? Don’t know yet. Send me to whom? Don’t know that either. Send me to do what? Still waiting on that, except you know already who you serve. In this season opening up before us, “Here am I, send me.” The rest shall be revealed in time, often in the moment. It’s a willing heart God desires. The sending may not be a geographical change. It may be a spiritual change. It may be a spiritual discipline. It may be simply a move deeper into the vocation to which you have been called. We honor the holiness of God by our openness to God in our daily lives. Every morning this prayer: I’m here, send me. I’m here, use me. I’m here, I’m yours.

Isaiah was not the last to have his life changed by the hem of the Lord’s robe.

Sick, shunned, suffering for years, a woman saw Jesus passing through her town. She saw him, she saw his robe, she saw the hem of his robe and thought to herself, if I could just touch the hem of his robe I might be healed. She followed alongside the crowds as the sight of him appeared and disappeared behind the heads and shoulders of the people lining the roadside. She saw her chance and slipped into the street behind him. Quickly now, heart racing, she came closer and closer to him. The noise was deafening, the sound of cheers and questions, laughter and accusations, all filling the air. She kept focus. She saw his robe, his simple robe dragging the ground lightly behind him. Then, before she even knew she was going to do it, like she was being pulled by forces greater than herself, the hem of Jesus’ robe filled her vision. She didn’t just see it, she reached out as far as she could reach, and she touched it, just touched it. She didn’t grab it like a souvenir hawker, she didn’t clutch it as if to claim it as her own, she just wanted to touch the hem of Jesus robe. And she did. The power of God came into her. And she was made whole.

The hem of God’s robe. Big enough to fill the temple. Close enough to heal. Keep your eyes and your heart open. You may be given an Isaiah-like vision, swept up into the holy of holies to see an overwhelming vision of God face-to-face. But I think that’s an Easter or Pentecost high and holy desire.

Keep your eyes and heart open in ordinary time and you’re more likely to just catch a glimpse of the hem of God’s robe pass by one day as Christ ministers in the world by the Holy Spirit among those who are suffering. Follow that sign, that nudge, that intuition; it’s where Christ is on the move and the calling is the same: who will come with me? How can we not answer: “Here I am! Send me!”

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