

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 6:1-8

Pew Bible O.T. pg. 597-598

¹ 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. ² 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. ³ And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” ⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵ 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!” ⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar of the Lord with a pair of tongs. ⁷ 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.” ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here I am; send me!”

Scripture Lesson: Mark 5:25-34

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 37

²⁵ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years. ²⁶ She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had, and she was no better but rather grew worse. ²⁷ She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ for she said, “If I but touch his cloak, I will be made well.” ²⁹ Immediately her flow of blood stopped, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰ Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my cloak?” ³¹ And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’ ” ³² He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³ But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

Isaiah 6:1-8 and Mark 5:25-34

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“The Hem of His Robe”

Pastor Amy Terhune

My former pastor, Bill Ritter, tells a story about attending a wedding a friend. It was one of those rare times when a preacher finds himself down there in the pew rather than up here in the pulpit, because it was a wedding of a friend, and Bill was a guest. His friend had been through a great deal of pain—losing his first wife to cancer—and Bill and his wife sat there, so thrilled that this friend had again found love and companionship. Bill describes it this way: “...it was a beautiful church with a beautiful organ playing beautiful music for a crowd of beautiful people who were behaving (for the most part) beautifully. Yes, beautifully. Except for the people immediately behind me. They were listening to nothing and talking about everything, including a lot of talk about hunting. And as the wedding got closer and closer, their talk got louder and louder ... I found myself wanting to turn and glare at them, ever so briefly ... But I didn’t. I sat facing forward, grinding my teeth in silence. My friend’s adult children began processing [up the aisle for the wedding]. Whereupon a tear or two began rolling. And the organ began swelling. Which was when it happened.

“But before I tell you what happened, I need to tell you about this church. The sanctuary is dominated (architecturally) by a floor-to-ceiling window of stained glass. I mean, the whole front of the church is a window. It’s not just a window in the wall. The window *is* the wall. And it’s mostly of Jesus (although the disciples are in it, too, along with several other images that are less recognizable, but no less beautiful).

“So there I was—forward facing, tears welling, family coming, organ swelling, when the man behind me talking about hunting noticed the window for the very first time. I mean, we'd been sitting there for twenty minutes. How could he have missed it before this? But, seeing it now, he pointed it out to his female companion. Then, in a stage whisper, he said: "Wow. I wonder what a .357 Magnum would do to that?" To which she responded (in no less of a stage whisper): "It would send you straight to hell." [3 ¶s adapted slightly from “The Best of Rooms” by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.]

Now, this young man had no intention of blowing out the window with a shotgun. He was just a dumb young man who said the first thing that entered his mind without ever thinking about what he was saying or where he was. It's not so much what the young man said that's a problem, although I suppose I find it a little bit disturbing. What's far more disturbing, in my opinion, is the complete lack of awareness as to where he was. Or perhaps I should say, the complete lack of sensitivity to things sacred and holy.

Bill goes on to say (and again, I quote): “I wanted to turn around, shake his lapels, and say to him: "Look, buddy, if this place, if this window, if the figure in the window, if this moment, if these lovers, if none of this means anything to you, can you tell me what, if anything, does?" I mean, at some point in your life (God willing), you are going to have an experience for which no other word will suffice except the word "sacred." And it's going to touch you, move you, humble you. Moreover, it's going to shut your ever-moving mouth, bring a tear to your eye, form a lump in your throat, drag a long, slow sigh from your lungs, and quite possibly even drop you to your knees!” [adapted slightly from “The Best of Rooms” by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.] Which everyone ought to experience at least once in their life, if they're truly going to live.

But I retell Bill's story for a reason. Robert A. Hausman makes this accusation against the church: “We have striven for clarity rather than mystery, for simplicity rather than majesty.” [from “Called! Cleansed! Sent!” www.Sermons.com.] In short, we have somehow let go of the awesome, electrifying, spectacular, magnificent, heart-stopping, blood-pounding, breath-taking, mind-blowing, gut-wrenching intensity of that which is HOLY. Do we even know what ‘holy’ is anymore? Is this sanctuary holy? Is this pulpit holy? Is scripture ‘holy’? In Revelations 15, we read that God alone is holy! Yet elsewhere in Scripture—in Romans 12:1 or Colossians 3:12, for example—we are told that we may be holy. Our bodies may be made holy, our relationships may be made holy, our behavior may be made holy, even our hands, when lifted in praise, are ‘holy hands’ according to I Timothy 2:8. So what is it to be ‘holy’? What is ‘holiness’? Robert A. Hausman goes on to say: “Our concern is simply that we relearn what "holy" means. Only by knowing who God is do we know who we are.”

And so we turn to the prophet Isaiah, who encounters God and lives to tell the story. That is not a feat to be taken lightly. The hem of God's robe fills the temple. Seraphs are in attendance above him, singing praise. The pivots on the thresholds shake at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. Here is described an encounter with Yahweh Sabaoth. That is, Yahweh, Lord of hosts. Yahweh, God, Lord of heaven and earth, Lord of Creation, Lord of stars and planets, and solar systems, and galaxies unknown to us. Lord of nature. Lord of the proton, neutron, and electron. Lord of particle matter. Lord of Energy. Lord of Wisdom. Yahweh Sabaoth. Lord of hosts. In short, Lord of everything, everyone, everyplace. Lord God. Period.

But when we turn to the gospel lesson from Mark, we meet another who encounters God and lives to tell the story. She too, sees the hem of God's robe. Only she is not surrounded by angels or thunder and smoke or the splendor of heaven. She's surrounded by crowds, yet isolated in her own personal hell, of sorts, having sought healing for a hemorrhage for twelve years. Poked and prodded, treated sometimes as a specimen to be studied, excluded from worship because blood is unclean, she clings to one last hope – that Jesus is who they say he is: the Son of the Living God, the Lord of all, the Great Physician whose touch makes whole.

In both cases, the holiness of God is what we encounter. In both cases, Isaiah and our unnamed woman from Mark encountered God. And as Bill Ritter put it, each is moved and humbled. Their ever-moving mouth is shut, eyes well with tears, a lump forms in the throat, a long, slow sigh is dragged from

their lungs, and each falls to their knees! “Woe is me!” says Isaiah. “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!” We don’t know what the woman says to Jesus when he calls out to the one who touched him, but we can guess: “I was lost. I was unclean. I was all but dead. And I touched. And I was healed.”

What fascinates me about her is that she does the touching. Isaiah finds himself in God’s presence, and an angel comes with a burning coal from the altar, touched Isaiah’s lips, and that is what purifies his sin. Isaiah is not left in his sinfulness, nor does he offer up a sacrifice, as if he could atone for his state. Forgiveness comes to him from above. God freely rescues him, proving that the God of majesty is the God of mercy. The woman instinctively knows that already. She knows that the healing comes from God. Jesus confirms this when he tells her, “your faith has made you well.”

Paired together, these two stories show us that it is God’s might that enables God’s compassion to change to world. God’s majesty is what enables God’s mercy to outlast evil. God’s love is God’s awesome power. God’s grace is how God’s justice is enacted. God’s righteousness is what enables his relationship with us to save us! Because God is holy, God is life. Because God is holy, God is resurrection. Because God is holy, God is God. And when it comes right down to it, we don’t need another pal, we don’t need another pill, and we don’t need another new-age, pie-in-the-sky flutterfluff. We need God. We need a new sense, a new respect, new eyes for HOLY.

And so we today acknowledge both God’s otherness and God’s intimacy; God is thunderous and gentle; God is righteous and merciful; God is beyond, and yet, so close.

“There was a young man who served his country during the Vietnam War. He was the lead man on a jungle patrol: the one responsible for looking for land mines, booby traps, and ambushes. With every step he risked death, and if he made a mistake his entire unit would be in danger.

“When the war was finally over he couldn’t believe that he was still alive while all his friends were dead. He often felt he would have been better off if he *had* died. He was haunted constantly by nightmares of his friends dying. Slowly his spirit was robbed of life. He saw many doctors and had many tests, but no one could come up with a cure for his myriad ills. He continued to decline as time passed.

“One day he went and visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. Tears flowed freely as he touched the names of his friends etched in the hard black stone. He looked for and found every name he remembered except one. Back and forth he walked, touching the wall, looking for the one last name. He looked in the book that listed all the names and told where to find them on the wall. He asked the attendant, but the attendant couldn’t find the name either.

"Are you sure that's the right name?" the attendant asked him.

"Yes," the man replied, "It's my name."

“The attendant looked at him. She reached out and touched his face and said softly: "Your name isn't here. You must be alive. Go home and get on with living." [preceding story from Arnold Fox, M. D. and Barry Fox, Ph.D. *Making Miracles* (Emmaus, PA: The Good Spirit Press, 1989), pp. 70-72; as used in “Once In A Lifetime” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com. Adapted slightly.]

A black coal. A bleak existence. A black wall. Burnt lips. Spent hope. An angel’s touch. A Holy God who transforms lives and hearts. If that doesn’t move and humble, shut our ever-moving mouths, bring tears to our eyes, form lumps in our throat, drag long, slow sighs from our lungs, and quite possibly even drop us to our knees, then what will? There aren’t words for a touch like this. Except ... perhaps ... holy. Thanks be to God. Amen.