

THE TOUCH OF GOD

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

“He touched my mouth...” (Isaiah 6 v.7)

To encounter God is to meet oneself for the first time and the world is turned upside down and inside out and changed forever. That is what we learn from our readings in Isaiah and Luke.

The description of Isaiah’s encounter is not at all what one would expect of such an experience. God is shielded from Isaiah’s gaze by the Seraphim; all he sees is the robe that covers the floor. And so in the silence of the Temple Isaiah both sees and does not see God, sees God and encounters himself for the first time, sees God and encounters the world.

This sparse description of the encounter suggests in the fifth chapter of Isaiah that the appearance of God is too great and too much to take in with human eyes. It is not God that is at the center of the description but the skirt of his robe and the call of the seraphim around him. What strikes me about the way Isaiah describes the moment of meeting is that God’s presence is not described as a presence of power or might. This God is not clothed in the authority of the powerful. This is not a Zeus casting thunderbolts from heaven. The cry of the Seraphim tells rather of the power of holiness, not the crushing power of might and power.

Compare this to the early scenes in “The King and I” when Anna first meets the King of Siam. She horrifies everyone by looking straight at him while everyone else looks to the ground averting their eyes from the King. The acknowledgement of the kings’ power is found in the act of obeisance for the King has complete power over his people and however wise was his use of power it nevertheless came down in the end to the exercise of control over his people. The King’s power is the power of control.

What does Isaiah’s telling of this vision in the temple tell us of God? It is not God’s power of control, it is not God’s might, it is not God’s muscle that is paramount, but his holiness. Holiness is not about power for the holy designates the moral force of that which is pure and undefiled. It is of this moral force that Isaiah becomes aware in the presence of the seraphim. Through the presence of the seraphim, the messengers of God, he becomes aware of a presence that is beyond his human understanding.

When we compare Isaiah’s response to his vision and the way in which the children of the King of Siam respond to the King’s presence we can learn something of the meaning of holiness. In “The King and I” the people lower their eyes before the King of Siam and do not dare to look upon him as they bow in awe of his power over life and death. They fear their King. When Isaiah encounters the Holy he encounters himself and begins to understand himself for what he is for the first time. Before the King of Siam the people’s obeisance was to a power from above, but Isaiah’s obeisance was born of a new self-understanding as he stands in the presence of moral perfection.

To stand in the presence of a person of power is to stand in a place of honor. It is an experience filled with pride. President Clinton rewarded his big donors with the prize of sleeping in

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the Lincoln bedroom. The gurus of our new age religions would tell us that what we need to cultivate is the presence of the powers they believe to be sacred, standing in the presence of the great and the good. Something of their greatness supposedly rubs off onto our sense of ourselves. Mystics of this age of self advancement try to attract us with tales of increasing our power of self or attaching to ourselves a greater sense of mental purity. Listen to the siren songs of today's Lotus Eaters and if you practice the powers of mind you will enter a state of mental bliss and serenity. Or as one television siren put it: Eat right, think right and live well!! God's in his heaven and all is right with the world becomes: "I have practiced the presence of God in my mind and my body and all is well with me."

Spirituality has been turned into a feeling of inner warmth, and holiness has been transformed into a feeling of good fellowship. In associating with the great and the good I become great and good like them. In accepting the powers of God, under whatever name you choose to give him, through my spiritual efforts I become god-like. My spiritual nature is thus fulfilled and I am made holy.

But listen to Isaiah as he approaches the one who is holy. It is not a cry of self-satisfaction, nor is it a cry of wondrous fulfillment. The encounter with God is a moment of self-revelation. Isaiah meets himself for the first time in his life.

"Woe is me! I am doomed, for my own eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts; I, a man of unclean lips, I who dwell among a people of unclean lips."

What Isaiah saw so clearly in the Holiness of God was not just the greatness of God, but his moral purity. God is great, but it is before his moral purity that we grasp something of who we are. What is the power of this King? Not the power of the sword, not the power of establishing arbitrary laws, not the power to enforce obedience, but the power of moral purity. It is before this power that Isaiah encounters himself for the first time. It is before this power that Isaiah understands who he is – mortal human being.

It was the same with Peter, James and John as they stood besides Jesus at the side of the lake. They encountered power in a way they had never encountered it before. They had, I am sure, been able to make excellent catches of fish before for they were skilled fishermen. Hauling in a good catch was certainly gratifying, but not worthy of much more than a slap on the back, a good day's work well done.

But there was something more to this power than giving them a good catch of the day. Peter grasps the essence of Jesus' power and responds in exactly the same way as Isaiah: "God Lord, leave me, sinner that I am." Before the moral purity of this man Peter encounters himself. It is not simply a matter of thinking that I did this or that wrong, but that I am not worthy to be counted as one of your followers. This recognition of the nature of the self is but a reflection of God's purity, goodness and truth. There lies at the heart of the created world a power of goodness that the world itself cannot comprehend and before which it must acknowledge its emptiness. That is what Peter and Isaiah saw.

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The created bows down before its creator. This is not an obeisance which comes as a response to a command, but an acknowledgment that the moral power of creation has been recognized and understood. The cries of self-abasement that come from Isaiah and Peter are not cries of guilt, but cries of self-understanding arising from recognizing the moral purity of the creator of the universe. They knew who they were for the first time in their lives. They understood that they were not the lords of all creation, but parts of creation. They were not themselves pure, good and just, but could only be thus by reflecting God's own purity, goodness and justice.

But there is one other thing that we must notice about Isaiah's responsive cry. He understands that he is part of a society which does not recognize its dependence upon its creator. He is part of a society that lacks this same purity and goodness that is revealed in the holiness of God. The society looks to its own power and to its own glory and Isaiah recognizes that he is who he is because he is part of that society. This understanding was enough to give to Isaiah the deepest sense of despair. If I am as nothing and I live in the midst of a society which is as nothing, what can I be? Surely I am not worthy to live.

It is in this recognition, however, that one finds the healing touch of God enter into his life. Isaiah has proclaimed the unworthiness of his lips, and it is as a preacher that his lips proclaim his deepest being, and it is to his lips that the healing touch of God's holiness comes. The Holy is the purity and justice and goodness that reveals to us our inadequacy and need, but is also the power that enables the distance between the absent God and the God who is present to enter into our human lives. God does not leave us to wallow around in feelings of guilt and despair. In the recognition of our inadequacy there is also the healing touch of God. Our very existence may be impure, but it is in the touch of God that we find we can live with a new sense of self which is given by God. "This has touched your lips, now your iniquity is removed and your sin is wiped out."

The distance between ourselves and God is bridged by the power of the holiness that makes us aware of the bridge in the first place. This is the paradox of our lives; this is the mystery of salvation. We know that we are not worthy of God's love because he is holy, yet he touches us and brings to us a new possibility of life and a new hope.

But that can never be the end of the matter for us. Our recognition of God's holiness can not end with our own feeling of self-cleansing. Much of the problem with the television gurus of today, as well as the talk show hosts who try to give publicity to the horrors of our day is that they let us rest in a glow of self satisfaction. Either we feel gratified that we have been reshaped or that we feel we are not as bad as the people we have witnessed giving their testimony of horror.

So we are left with a decision. "I heard the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?'" If we recognize that there is a society which does not understand its poverty of life, and which rejects the very justice of the Holy God, then what is to be done? This comes to Isaiah as a question of his life. We are not left alone to a moment of self-praise, but are offered a challenge of tremendous proportions.

Peter, James and John are given the same challenge. They see and understand their impurity before God, before this Jesus who speaks for God, but they are not left alone by the lakeside to contemplate their catch of fish. They are called to become catchers of human beings – called to

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take to the world the story of a new creation which will enable all who enter it to live with hope and assurance that they live in accord with the one who created the world.

But we must note that this product comes with a warning label attached and it reads: Danger. Prophetic words can lead to conflict. To speak this truth of the moral purity of the creator is not merely to try to tell it to the world, but it means that one has to live out that truth in the whole of life. The touch of God upon the lips is the touch of God upon the very heart of life, and it is not only what we say and preach that is important but the whole of the life that is embodied in the word. The Gift of God is his healing touch. This is the gift of a new life to be lived in a sick world, but it is a gift that we must be willing to accept. It is offered to us in the call to be his messengers in the world. You and I are asked to respond to that call: “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” That is the question that faces us in the very presence of our own moment of truth. God’s love will not leave us alone. It does not leave us alone because we have been drawn into a different way of understanding the world.

One of the interesting things about the Harry Potter books is that they describe life in a world filled with magic. Harry Potter at the Hogwarts School learns how to maneuver and live in this strange universe. To live in this world one had to come to understand its different parameters. Only in this way could you begin to live within its different norms. What Peter and Isaiah understood after their encounter with God was that we too live in a different world and when we begin to see that our world is not simply a world of mechanical and scientific facts but is also laden with a moral purpose created by a God who is moral purity itself then we begin to understand that life itself is different. Decisions that we make are determined by different criteria – it is moral purpose that drives our action. We become different people when we see the world as one full of moral purpose. This is why discovery of this world of holy purpose comes with a challenge. “Whom shall I send?” As we live lives dedicated to this holy purpose we might draw others into its orbit and create a new society. This is our challenge as a community.

As Peter, James and John responded by following Jesus – how will you respond? Isaiah’s response was: “Here am I; send me.” Will that be our answer?

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