

Holy, Holy, Holy!
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
Date: May 31, 2015

"Holy, Holy, Holy!" Sermon Pilgrim Church UCC May 31, 2015--Trinity Sunday (Isaiah 6:1-8)

Today we heard the Prophet Isaiah's vision of God. There's a mighty throne and God's robe filling the Temple and the Seraphs (Angelic beings) attending God proclaiming: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." It's a holy moment depicted as a personal religious experience. When Isaiah comes out of it, he feels convicted because of his sins: "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!" In the vision, Isaiah has an encounter with one of those Seraphs who holds a hot coal to his mouth, not to burn him but to declare that your guilt has departed and your sins have been blotted out. God speaks, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And how can Isaiah say anything but, "Here am I, send me!"[1]

There are two ways to use Isaiah's call story to inspire us. First, Isaiah's call story emphasizes the necessity of knowing how we view God. And second, the power of religious experiences helps us turn our faith into action.

Okay, so we can get at this story by seeing it as a vision, as a religious experience. It's not meant to be taken hyper literally, but was how Isaiah could understand God. This morning we see how Isaiah understood the moment God called him to be the prophet God needed for probably sixty years. That's right, Isaiah of Jerusalem AKA First Isaiah who we attribute Isaiah Chapters 1-39 to, prophesized during the reign of four kings of Judah. Isaiah spent decades upon decades working for God. His call to this work took the form of a vision, a moment that changed his life.

Now when you picture God perhaps you don't see God sitting on a throne with a long flowing robe that fills up our sanctuary. That image was deeply meaningful for Isaiah when he lived in the 8th Century B.C.E. The question becomes: what's the image or feelings or thoughts about God that help you understand God? This story, among other things, is about God meeting us where we are and people understanding God within the context of their life and times.

After all, it's Trinity Sunday—a day we're meant to engage the mystery of God. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is tough and it's often been one of the historical beefs that Jews and Muslims have with Christians because it can seem like we're worshipping three gods and not one God. You'll never find the word "Trinity" in the Bible. But we have interesting passages like when Isaiah hears from God, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" There's weird singular and plural vocabulary going on sometimes in the Bible where it seems like God is more complicated than we may imagine. Even the Angelic Beings say that God is "Holy, holy, holy!" Three times the holiness up in here!

Thinking of God as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer or the more traditional Father, Son, and Holy Spirit points to how we understand God as active in the world. Catherine LaCugna who was a Feminist Catholic Theologian speaks about the Trinity as thoroughly relational, that God is attached, personal, and responsive. She prioritized the Trinity and even wrote a book called *God For Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life*. LaCugna argued that the Trinity is a theology of relationship which explores the mysteries of love, personhood, self-revelation, and communion. Early on, Christians tried to figure out how to make sense of God's presence in Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The theological concept of the Trinity was birthed from a relational view of God

with us and early believers trying to reconcile God as immanent and transcendent, right here with us and mysteriously outside us.[2]

The ways that we understand God affects how we live as Christians here and now. I'm a fan of the idea that the Trinity points to God being relational, attached, personal, and responsive. Do we always feel God right there beside us? Maybe not. But is God with us in the midst of everything we face? Yes. And if we believe this about God, it affects how we live out our relationships with each other. Just as God is deeply relational, we are called to be deeply relational. Just as God questions Isaiah, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" We can respond, "Here am I, send me!"

Now speaking of understanding God, I've been watching the TV show A.D. The Bible Continues, knowing there would be some discrepancies and the Book of Acts in particular would be interpreted super literally. But it's rather entertaining! Yes it's more conservative Christianity, and it makes you think about what happened after Jesus' death and resurrection and how the early followers began to spread the faith when there were so few of them and their message wasn't very popular.

My favorite storyline has been Saul's as last week Saul had his big conversion on the road to Damascus. Saul has been absolutely horrible—inciting the crowds to stone Stephen and relentlessly hunting down the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem only to have them beaten and thrown into jail. Last week Saul saw a vision of Jesus asking why are you persecuting me and then becomes blind. As we know from the Book of Acts, Saul gets his sight back, his sins are forgiven, he's told that he will be the Apostle to the Gentiles, and he's baptized to seal the deal as a new follower of Jesus Christ. Saul explained his conversion to someone he'd persecuted who doubts his motivations by saying, "I once was blind, but now I see."

What Saul's conversion brings to light is that we don't come out of holy moments with God the same as we went in. It was fascinating to see how the creators of A.D. depicted the conversion. Saul was seeing Jesus bathed in light and the weather was intense and the whole area around him was dark and swirling as he was shielding his eyes on the ground. Saul's companions, on the other hand, just saw him flailing around in an empty field basically having no idea what was causing him to react. When we may have a religious or mystical experience, a Thin Place moment—however we term an encounter with the divine, well, we are fundamentally changed. The world looks different as we connect with God in intense ways that others around us may not be able to see or understand. There could be a religious experience that it takes a good long time to even acknowledge as such. The evolution of religious experience into life-changing action is what happens to Saul on the road to Damascus and what happened to Isaiah.

We can experience God in our midst because God is attached to us and can be personal. From that experience of God we can be God's hands and feet in the world. The order in Isaiah's Call Story is echoed in the way we worship God today. Praise, confession, forgiveness of sins, listening to the Word, and responding to the Word.[3] The order in which we worship has some majorly significant roots, my friends. God's forgiveness gives us strength to go out and make a difference. Our praise of God helps us to remember that God is "holy, holy, holy" and worthy of our worship both in our words and deeds.

So Isaiah's call story emphasizes the necessity of knowing how we view God because it affects how we live out our faiths. And that the power of religious experiences helps us turn our faith into action. Encountering the Holy changes us for the better and we have a responsibility afterwards to respond. Hopefully with, "Here am I; send me!"

Feels like we're hearing a lot about being sent out lately with it being graduation season. We might come across commencement addresses that capture our attention, from politicians to actors to authors to heads of corporations—there are many inspiring messages. One of my all-time favorite commencement addresses is J.K. Rowling's she gave at Harvard. Her words ring so true! Here the author of the Harry Potter series who came out of poverty in Scotland looked out at the graduating class and said, "But how much more are you, Harvard graduates of 2008, likely to touch other peoples' lives? Your intelligence, your capacity for hard work, the education you have earned and received, give you unique status and unique responsibilities . . . if you choose to use your status and influence to raise your voice on behalf of those who have no voice; if you choose to identify not only with the powerful but with the powerless; if you retain the ability to imagine yourself into the lives of those who do not have your advantages, then it will not only be your families who celebrate your existence but thousands and millions of people whose reality you have helped change. We do not need magic to transform our world; we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already." [4]

Amen J.K. Rowling! Now don't these words ring true for so many of us sitting here this morning, if we do say so ourselves? Intelligence, capacity for hard work, education unique status and responsibilities. This is us, folks! It doesn't take magic to transform our world. We already have that power inside of us for we have God-given gifts and talents and a great deal to be thankful for. Some days it sure may not feel that way. Yet as we used to cheer in seminary, "God is good all the time! And all the time, God is good!"

Our good God needs us. "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Will we slink away and avoid eye contact or will we declare, "Here am I; send me!" Send me out into my neighborhood to witness to your love. Send me out to speak to my friends about what my church community means to me and could mean for them. Send me out to serve others in your name. Send me out to work for justice and peace. Send me out to just be kind and pay attention to people who need to feel compassion. For we believe that you, O God, are holy, holy, holy—and here we are, send us! Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Isaiah 6:3, 6:5, and 6:8.

[2] Notes from Dr. Benjamin Valentine, Systematic Theology I, Andover Newton Theological School, Fall Semester 2007.

[3] Kristin Emery Saldine, Pastoral Perspective of Isaiah 6:1-8 in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3, 30.

[4] J.K. Rowling, Very Good Lives: The Fringe Benefits of Failure and the Importance of Imagination, 65-67.