

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT on  
5 Epiphany, February 6, 2022 by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Isaiah 6:1-13. Psalm 138. 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. Luke 5:1-11

How did you respond to hearing the story of Isaiah's awesome experience with God and the story of Peter's awesome experience with Jesus? Let's explore these two biblical stories and see how they might connect with our lives. What is God like in these stories? How does God relate with human beings? What does God expect of us?

In today's first reading, Isaiah was overwhelmed by a vision of God which he experienced while he was worshipping in the temple in Jerusalem. It was a mystical vision, yet Isaiah grounds this experience at a literal moment in human history. He tells us that the vision came to him "in the year that King Uzziah died", which was about 742 BC. The death of King Uzziah marked the beginning of the rapid decline of Northern Israel as an independent nation. It was a time great of affluence. The wealthy leaders had been taking over the land of the poor peasants and making them slaves, building huge homes on the backs of cheap labor. Injustice was the norm. Most of the society ignored God's commandments to love of God and all neighbors, to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God. Oh, they talked about God protecting the nation, but there was little willingness to live the values God had created them to live. The real driving focus of the society was greed; greed for more power, money, and control, more pleasure and possessions. But the nations around Israel were getting stronger and threatening the future dominance of Israel. There was great anxiety about would happen after Uzziah's death. Could Israel continue to sustain its affluence? What would their future be?

In this historical environment, Isaiah had come to worship in the Jerusalem temple. While he was there, God came to him in a vision. All of a sudden, he saw the Most High God, King of the Universe there, in the temple. God was sitting on a throne, so high and lofty that that Isaiah could only see the bottom of God's robe which, by itself, filled the whole temple. There were seraphs, angel-like creatures with 6 wings which surrounded God's throne. They had to cover their faces because the glory of the Great King of the Universe was overwhelming. They were calling and singing to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory."

Let me pause the story for a moment. Do those words sound familiar to you? In every Eucharist we pray or sing that same "Holy, holy, holy" prayer that the seraphs prayed in Isaiah's vision. In Revelation chapter 4, John has a vision of God on a high throne in heaven and creatures with six wings were singing this same song of praise and adoration of Christ, the Great King of the Universe: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty."

It is easy for us to get so familiar with these words in our liturgy that we just mindlessly say or sing them. However, the early Christians included this hymn prayer in the Eucharist to remind themselves and us that we are living and worshipping in the presence of the same awesome God, King of the Universe who inspired the seraphs in Isaiah's vision and the saints and angels in heaven in the Book of Revelation. You and I will sing this same hymn prayer, the Sanctus, when we are in heaven, worshipping God with all the saints and angels who have gone before us. So, this morning, and whenever we pray or sing this hymn of adoration, we are actually practicing for heaven and singing along with what is being sung in heaven at the same moment. This hymn prayer is intended to remind us of Isaiah's experience, and to jolt us, shake us, overwhelm us with the mystical awareness that the awesome King of the Universe is still here among us on earth, as well as in heaven.

Now going back to the story, Isaiah was overwhelmed by this vision of being in God's presence. Isaiah's response was, "Woe is me! I'm lost. I'm out of my element, 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!"

Isaiah was very aware of the huge gap between the greatness of God and his small, insignificant, imperfect humanity. And Isaiah was aware that the nation in which he lived was not worthy to be in the Presence of such a great and awesome God because the lifestyle, the values which controlled and motivated his Nation were the opposite of the values and priorities God created human beings to live. Perhaps Isaiah was wondering, will I be destroyed by this great God? I know I'm not worthy to be here in God's presence.

Have you ever felt unworthy to pray or be in God's presence, like Isaiah did?

Notice that the Great God does not crush or belittle or condemn Isaiah. Instead, God sent one of the seraphs, with tongs, to take a live coal from the altar and he flew to Isaiah and touched his lips with the symbolic, holy purifying power of the burning coal. The seraph said, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then Isaiah knew that he was both unworthy and at the same time forgiven and loved by God.

Have you noticed that some people feel overwhelmed by their unworthiness? They always think of themselves as unacceptable to God. Have you also noticed that some people seem to feel confident that they are good and worthy and are not aware of the ways in which they are not worthy before God? Isaiah models for us the authentic response of people who have been in the presence of God...they know, in the core of their being, that they are both unworthy and forgiven, made worthy by the mercy of God.

I wonder...do you experience both your unworthiness before God and God's forgiving mercy which has made you worthy to walk with God and be a friend of God's?

Then Isaiah heard the voice of God saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" The freshly forgiven Isaiah blurted out. "Here am I; send me!" This overwhelming Great God gives dignity to Isaiah and to every person God created, imperfect as we all are, because God has a mission, a purpose for Isaiah and for every person to fulfill. Every morning, God says to each of us, will you go for us today? Will you fulfill the mission I have given for you to fulfill today, in the context of your life, at this time in history? Will you walk with me and let me show you how I want you to listen, love, serve and live my way of justice and truth, peace and love during all your interactions and choices and thoughts and words this day?

Isaiah's mission was very difficult. He kept telling people that God wanted them to change their destructive ways of living, which were contrary to God's commands. But no one changed. So, God allowed the Assyrian armies to totally destroy the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, just 20 years after King Uzziah died. They are only remembered as the Lost Tribes of Israel.

Now, let's skip ahead about 700 years and spend a few minutes with Peter and one of his early experiences with Jesus. Have you ever imagined what it would be like for you to spend time with Jesus? What would you say to Jesus? What might Jesus say to you?

In today's Gospel, Jesus comes to meet Peter while he is mending his fishing nets on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, after an unsuccessful night of fishing. Crowds were gathering to listen to Jesus speak and they were pressing to get close to Jesus. So Jesus got into Peter's boat and asked Peter to take the boat out a little ways from the shore and anchor it there, so Jesus could sit down in the boat and teach without the crowds overwhelming him.

When Jesus had finished teaching, he said to Peter, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." This really irritated Peter. After all, Peter was a commercial fisherman. He knew about catching fish. This Jesus was a carpenter and a rabbi. What did he know about fishing? Yet, even in his irritation, Peter also knew that there was something about Jesus that he needed to respect. So, Peter, reluctantly said, "Master, (notice what deep respect Peter already had for Jesus, to call him Master) we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." So they reluctantly dragged their nets back into the boat and went back out on the lake. When they got to the deep water and let down their nets, they caught so many fish that their nets were bulging and breaking. They had to call their partners to come in another boat to help them drag in the net overflowing with fish.

Now, how would you respond to this surprisingly huge catch of fish? Would you have started thinking about all the money you could make on this huge haul and what you would buy with the money? Peter had a very different response. He was more overwhelmed by who Jesus was than by the number of fish. Who is this rabbi who knows more about fishing and more about life than I do? As soon as they got to shore, Peter knelt down at Jesus' knees saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

Notice how Peter's response was like Isaiah's response? I am not worthy to be with you, Jesus. You are way out of my class, way beyond my understanding. We can't work together because I'm too different from you.

Jesus responds to Peter much like God responded to Isaiah's confession of his unworthiness. Jesus said, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will be" working alongside me, drawing people into a life-giving relationship with God. Jesus gave Peter the dignity, in the midst of his unworthiness, to have a mission, working alongside Jesus as his friend, to bring healing and hope to people in need.

Luke concludes the story by saying, when they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything, including all the fish they had just caught, and followed Jesus. Jesus was their greatest treasure. They lived the rest of their very imperfect lives as friends and companions with Christ.

Most of us have not had the kind of dramatic experiences of God that Isaiah and Peter did. But most of us have probably had moments when we were profoundly aware of the greatness and nearness of God. In what ways, in what moments have you experienced little glimpses of the awesome greatness and nearness of God?...

Have you ever experienced your unworthiness, your smallness in comparison to the greatness of God?...

Have you experienced God's forgiveness of your flaws and failures and God's loving respect for your dignity and worth?

Have you experienced God's call to you to be Christ's friend and representative in the way you live your daily life?

Let's close our eyes for a few moments and be still in the awesome presence of God who is here with us right now... As you reflect on the stories of Isaiah and Peter, what might God be saying to you at this moment in your life?...

Right now, and each morning this week, I invite you to ask God to 1) help you become more aware of God's awesome presence in your life...and 2) to help you recognize God's purpose, God call to you in this one day. Let's pray those two prayers in the silence of our hearts right now, and each morning of this coming week...

Day by day, Dear Lord, three things we pray; to see you more clearly, love you more dearly, follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen