

Rev. Rebecca L. Kiser
Staying Connected to God - Awe, Unity & Humility
5/30/2021 Trinity B

Our texts this morning from Isaiah and John's gospel are among the most powerful and basic texts of faith we have. I wish they were appointed on different Sundays, so I could preach on each one separately - in fact, I might just give myself permission to not follow the lectionary, and do just that! Those of us who've attended Sunday School and worship most of our lives may have these two texts memorized. For this Trinity Sunday, we are granted a glimpse of God as awe-inspiring and perhaps even fear-inspiring, way out of the realm of what we humans consider normal; yet a God who seeks to be revealed and known by a very human Jesus who also talks deeply of spiritual mysteries, including the Spirit who is at work in the world.

I'm not going to explain Trinity, except to emphasize the deep unity and relational aspect that must be part of this Divine one that is also three. That God is an "I" as well as a "We" goes all the way back to the book of Beginnings (Genesis, duh) chapter 1, where God creates humanity "in our image and likeness." We humans are created to be relational as God is, created to care for one another as we care for ourselves. I learned a new word reading up for this sermon - the word "interbeing", or "to interbe." It has to do with how everything is interconnected, with an example of a plain piece of paper - a piece of paper that comes about because of trees (and thus sun and rain and clouds and earth), because of people (who have to eat food, make cloth to dress in and use machines), and this includes bread, meat, and so much more. Everything is woven together even in a simple thing like a piece of paper.

I chose a quote Howard Thurman made when addressing a graduation (at Garrett) as our thought before worship - "*We must proclaim the truth that all life is one and that we are all of us tied together.*" Thurman goes on to build on this truth: "Therefore it is mandatory that we work for a society in which the least person can find refuge and refreshment..." And he makes it personal - "*You must lay your lives on the altar of social change so that wherever you are, there the Kingdom of God is at hand.*"

Thurman's take-away from the great oneness and relatedness of God, in which humanities made to image, that SINCE everything is interbeing, then the responsibility and obligation on each of us is that all people, each person, know the shalom of God, that peace and wholeness that God desires for us. So that where there is disparity, faith needs to be working; where there is discrimination, faith needs to be working; where there is hierarchy, faith needs to be working; where there are those in need while others are fine - there faith calls us to be working. Until all are whole, humanity is not whole; until all are free, humanity is not free;

until all are okay, humanity is not okay. This is the sharing in the gospel of Christ we are called to; this is the completing of the work of Christ that is our call.

This idea of “interbeing”, and the union in the Spirit that I talked about last week, might sound pretty mystical to us - it’s less about knowing the right answers and more about living in and experiencing the reality of all things in Christ. And mysticism is sometimes sneered at by people of action, who like to talk about navel-gazers and such put-down type words. When I was studying in Matthew Fox’s program, he used to point out that the mystic and the prophet were two sides of the same coin - the more one is transformed in inner work, the more one longs to bring that same vision to outer work. The more a person realizes and experiences the oneness of God and self, realizes the connection of all things through the Spirit and the reality of Christ’s kingdom on earth; then the more that person wants the whole world to come into that kingdom and live in those promises. For example, Thomas Merton, who writes so much of the inner life, explained that he didn’t go into a monastic life in order to escape the world - he was in the monastic life for the sake of the world - that his work in the monastery was for the world. It wasn’t running away, it wasn’t losing himself in a spiritually ‘other’ type experience, to avoid all the hardship and suffering of the world, the ambiguity of human relationships, the difficulties of living with poverty and crime and politics. No, all that came with him.

It’s easy to think that developing that personal relationship with God is the desired end of following Christ: me and Jesus, being “saved,” our own experience of spiritual bliss and the blessings of faith as being the end result that we strive for here, followed by personally going to heaven. But that’s actually one side of the coin for those of us who follow Christ - that’s the believe me and step into my promises part. The other side of the coin is the care for the world that God SO loved, the world that God came into in Jesus the world that Jesus SO loved that he spoke out against injustices, honored the least among the folks around him including sinners, women, the dreaded tax collector, and many others - knowing that his teachings would lead to his death. The Spirit SO loves the world that it blows in and around and between and inside, nudging, convicting, inspiring - all these works in our hearts and souls. Yes, we need the inner resources and connection to God to be able to face and endure the difficult things in our societies, to work for the will of God to be done on earth as it already is in heaven. And that love we experience from God overflows into a love like Gods, for the whole world.

It is amazing that God, the Source of Life and Love even bothers with us; that God the Energy that underlies and perpetuates Life and Love, desires us and seeks us; that God who is Life and Love themselves continually seeks to be known by us and revealed in us.

Isaiah's vision of this God, which evidently came to him in a normal worship time and surprised the heck out of him, sounds like something from Hollywood's studios of special effects. Isaiah is not only overwhelmed by the grandeur and majesty of this God, he is also humbled. Remember what he says? "*I am a man of unclean lips, and dwell in a people of unclean lips.*" Isaiah's response to this wild spiritual encounter is to realize how far from being right with God he is, and how far his whole world is. In his vision of God, he realizes his fallenness, and the whole world's fallenness. He sees the extent of his - let's use the word "sin" in all that it means about mortality, fear of death, self-interest, wrong relationships, wrong acts, wrong aims, and all that is encompassed in sinfulness. He sees not only his own sinfulness and brokenness, but that this sinfulness and brokenness is endemic to the world. The ways of the world, in its hierarchies, discriminations, desires for power and wealth and domination that end in wars that devastate lands and peoples, and all that we humans do to one another and the creation in seeking only our own selfish ends - he feels the distance between himself and the Divine. (I don't like it that some see religious differences as catalysts for wars - true religion seeks healing and love for this world God loves. If religion gets caught up in power grabs and domination, it's lost its way and is no longer faith.)

Isaiah doesn't know how to fix it: "Woe is me!" he cries, And woe to all of us.

Continuing the picture of "unclean lips" as his names for this falling short, his lips are then cleansed with a coal from the altar before God. God provides the solution, as God did in Jesus, and as God has always done. Isaiah's cry of woe from the heart is the right response - we want to fix things, but we can't - God has to do it.

Then Isaiah hears God's call that "someone" needs to go into the world for "US" - hear the plural again? Who will go & carry the message? Embrace the work? Live in God's will? Take God's love to the world's people? The grateful Isaiah, with his cleansed lips, says "Here I am - send me." Once again, the right response of all of us - here we are, here I am - I will go, I will do it. Use me. Direct me. Tell me what to do, what to say.

Jesus calls this "being born from above," this believing the truth of God, this humbling of the self ego, this answering of the call. Various peoples have called this being overcome by God's love being awakened, enlightened, conversion, experiencing a breakthrough, and other names. In my own experience, more awakenings and conversions and breakthroughs of love keep happening as I follow where the Spirit leads. The process is the same as we read of Isaiah an increased awareness of conscious and unconscious wrong, a seeking of cleansing, and a renewed version of saying YES - "Here I am, send me." Theresa of Avila wrote that Jesus was

continually beckoning her to yet a new room in that Interior castle of the soul, deeper in, closer to the Beloved, nearer to that union with God.

I especially like the last verse from our reading in John's gospel story - Jesus says that God's purpose was not condemnation but salvation. When we encounter God's love and life, we realize that we're enough already - we are fallen, we live without even recognizing the invitation to life from God, much less answering it. We cry, "Woe is me, I am a person of unclean lips and dwell in a people of unclean lips." Jesus didn't come to hit us over the head with anger and judgement - although acknowledging Jesus' truth will show us that we are certainly fallen. No, God's purpose in Jesus was to offer a solution, a way of restoration, a path of healing, a path to wholeness, to that oneness that is the truth of God's world. Christ didn't come to toss us off the sled, or condemn us; Christ didn't come so God could write off this world as hopeless. Christ came in order that the world be saved. Christ came to announce that the realm of God is right here in the midst of all the chaos, and we can begin this new and right life even as we speak. We can step into the ways of Life and Love; we can step into living in the ways that will save the world.

This guy Nicodemus tries to avoid hearing Jesus' words about being born from above, born again, enlightened, awakened - and throws out a bunch of stuff about being back inside his mom's womb and being born again. It's pretty obvious Jesus is talking about a spiritual awakening, a new paradigm, a new way of being. It usually has to happen one by one, human by human - Jesus' purpose, however, is to literally SAVE THE WORLD. If humans are left alone in the way we are, the world is on a literal path of destruction. We can kill each other, wipe out whole populations in hateful genocides; we can damage the planet seeking our own wealth and domination. We have made a hole in the protective ozone layer around our planet that holds oxygen in and filters harmful rays of the sun. We have changed the course of the climate, and increased the extinction of species. Left to our own devices, we will destroy the world that God loves.

Jesus came to save that world, because God loves it. God loves us. God loves God's creations. The Christian vision isn't just my personal relationship with God - the Christian vision is to save the world and humanity by teaching the way people can live in oneness, can relate rightly to each other and the world. (Talk about choosing life...) God tells us how to live in this union of love for one another and with God. Christ shows us the path of life. The Spirit fills us with this love and life so that it will overflow wherever we are, so that the kingdom of God will be wherever we are. This is a high call. And it's an urgent call, a vital call. May we learn from Isaiah, and respond, "Here I am - send me." AMEN.