

May 30, 2021

Isaiah 6: 1-8

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“The Touch that Calls”

How do we know when we are in the presence of God? What is it like to suddenly be aware that we are standing on holy ground? The other morning, the morning I worked on this sermon in fact, I had two experiences, each different from the other, but both of them pointing to what it is like when we are in “The Presence.” I awoke early that day and decided to take a walk. The sun was rising but there was a thick fog all around and the morning’s light wasn’t yet pushing through. The air was cool but comfortable, and I tried to set my pace fast enough so that it was a bit of a workout and not just a leisurely stroll. Not long into my walking, I noticed moisture on my arms and face. My first thought was, “Boy, I’m really exercising and already building up a sweat.” But I knew my effort wasn’t that intense and then I realized that the foggy air was so thick with humidity, it was like walking through a cloud. I not only saw the fog, I was immersed in it, a part of it. God’s presence can be like that. There are times when we see the evidence of God at work, maybe through acts of compassion and love, and then it takes hold of our hearts and we are inspired and we become a part of what God is doing. We respond in compassion and love, and it is like being immersed in God’s divine purpose. And so, this is what it can be like in The Presence and those moments are holy. But it doesn’t always happen that way and the other experience I had that morning shows us how. I mentioned it was the day I was working on this message. When it’s nice I like to sit outside with my computer and that’s what I was doing. I sat there reflecting on my earlier experience in the fog and then I became aware of something else that was happening in the environment around me. There was a droning noise but it was in the distance. It wasn’t the hum of highway traffic that is nearly constantly in the background. It wasn’t the compressor sounds of my neighbor’s air conditioning unit, although that’s fairly consistent, too, this time of year. You know what I heard in the distance, because we’ve been talking about them coming after their 17 year hibernation. The cicadas have emerged. It’s a strange sound, and it was far in the distance, at first, but as the sun warmed the air and dried out the trees it became louder and closer. I couldn’t see them, and I don’t need to touch them, these weird little creatures, to prove that they are here. Their persistent sound is evidence enough that they are with us, at least for these handful of weeks. When I wasn’t concentrating or listening, I didn’t even notice. When I focused there was no doubt the cicadas were everywhere and being in God’s presence can be like that. We can’t touch God and if we aren’t focused we may not even be aware, but God’s persistent presence is everywhere. When we listen, we know. Hearing the scripture read and listening for God’s voice in the bible, appreciating beautiful music, perceiving cries for mercy and justice, sometimes far away and sometimes very near, all of these are a constant reminder that God is here. Some try to pin it down saying that being in God’s presence is the result of a particular experience or happens in a particular place, but that misses the point. Experiencing God can be as varied as the uniqueness of each of our lives. What is consistently true is that whoever we are and whatever is going on, God is ready to impact our lives in ways that move us to respond to God’s presence. We have a living faith when our faith shapes our lives. And so, what happens when we find ourselves in the presence of God?

The words from Isaiah’s 6th chapter tell us how the prophet is called by God to speak God’s word in the world. Hearing God’s call is directly connected to being in God’s presence. This is how it works. The Presence leads to the call which leads to our response to what God is asking of us. We identify Isaiah as one of the Great Prophets, but he didn’t start that way. In fact, when Isaiah found himself in God’s presence, with all of the smoke and fire, he thought his life was over. “Who am I?” he thought, “that God would call me?” Isaiah knew how small he was when compared to God’s immense presence and he was sure there was no way he could survive such an intimate encounter with the divine. What made it more troubling is that God was calling Isaiah to speak. Isaiah knew there was no way his voice could be used to extend God’s message because his lips were unclean. This wasn’t a physical condition but a spiritual one. How could someone as imperfect as Isaiah serve God? I love this story of Isaiah because we have so much in common with him. God wouldn’t choose us. We’re far from perfect. If our lips aren’t the issue there are plenty of other parts of our lives that aren’t all they should be. Isaiah questioned the call and I think we have a tendency to do the same. One thing we can trust is that God is never limited by our limitations. We can each look at our own lives to see how true this is. Katya and I have reflected numerous times on our personalities, how we are both mostly shy and reserved, and how amazing it is that God has called us to stand up in the gathering of God’s people and point toward Jesus and a life of faith. God calls us out of our weakness because that is when we must trust God most. This isn’t just our stories. It’s Isaiah’s story, and it’s your story, too. Trusting in a power you can’t see or touch, saying “yes” to a way of life that makes you ready to respond to the needs of other people and not just your own, and holding on to hope even when hardship comes your way - how is it possible for you to live in this faith. Well, God wraps you, wraps all of us, in a presence and calls us to be more than we would ever imagine possible. We do what we do in this faith because of what God is doing. When we’re in the presence we become part of what God makes possible.

As it turned out, Isaiah needed more to be fully convinced God could overcome his shortcomings. That's when things heated up and got very personal. Remember Isaiah's complaint that his lips were unclean. One of those holy flying creatures carried a burning coal from heaven's altar and touched the prophet's lips. God went right to the place that hurt. In that moment, Isaiah's brokenness was healed. His hesitancy was pushed back. His sinfulness was forgiven. The Presence leads to the call which leads to our response which is possible because of God's grace. Isaiah put his grace-healed lips together and responded to God, "Here I am, send me."

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus brings the touch of God's grace to the weakness and sinfulness of our lives. We know all about the imperfections that block us from responding to God. When God calls we are tempted to say, "God, why don't you look over there. There they are, send them." But, Jesus takes care of all of that because he is not only our Lord, he is our Savior. Jesus gets as close as a personal as we need him to be and that is why we can say along with the prophet, "Here I am, send me."

Last week I asked in my sermon if you are sensing that God was asking more of you. I'd like to end with that same question today. In my life and in yours, where is God most real and how are we responding? God is waiting. Patiently and with grace, God is waiting for us. Let us pray:

*God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour thy power. Help us to see you and hear you, that we would be ready to respond to your call upon our lives. Where we are tentative, give courage. Where we are anxious, give peace, and where we would otherwise deflect your grace to the lives of others help us to feel your grace and forgiveness in our lives, so that we will serve you and through faith proclaim, "Here I am, Lord, send me."*