

EPIPHANY V – 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

The two readings we have today are remarkably similar in their description of the call of men (people) to serve God. I will speak later about vocation in ways to which each and all of us may respond, but I want to begin with Isaiah and Peter, who are clearly being called into God's service, as prophet and priest, and as apostle/evangelist.

The story from Isaiah is very familiar and is used as the text for so many ordinations. I have either preached on it or heard sermons on it many times, and it never loses a fascination and wonder for me. We come upon the great prophet at a time of frustration and perhaps even a sense of failure. He has spoken prophetically to the king many times to try to get him to profess both faith in and allegiance to God, but the king opts to trust the Assyrians and surrenders to them for the protection of his people. So Isaiah retires in solitude and relives his memories, which is what he is doing here. [May I say, as a way to understand this further, that the Book of Isaiah is very long (66 chapters), and it spans two hundred some years, with a focus on two or three periods within that span. Isaiah, the man for whom the whole book is named, lived and prophesied, and probably served as a priest during the fifty years around 700BCE. Most of the book includes the teaching and preaching of the two or three schools of prophets during that whole span, yet this part of chapter six is perhaps the most intimate and autobiographical of all. It helps me to remind myself of the history and context. But that's enough. Let's get to the story.]

Isaiah is simultaneously in the Temple in Jerusalem and in the throne room of heaven. The temple was built to witness to that great spiritual

image, and in our Christian tradition—I think of the great Gothic cathedrals, including our Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul in W,DC, and St. John the Divine, in NYC—continue with that image. At one end, high and lifted up, is God’s throne (we have the high altar in place of that where Christ the King reigns), and Isaiah, who is standing with other priests and functionaries in a side porch, is witnessing the whole spectacle in a liturgy that is taking place in the Temple. At the same time, he is spiritually transported to the throne room of heaven. It is a vision, and he believes himself to be fully present there, as any and all of us do when we experience a vision. So, while all the ceremonial is going on, Isaiah is drawn to the very being of God. He is not bold enough to look into God’s face, to try to describe God, he simply looks at the sparkling train of God’s robes that flow out from God, flow throughout that space and out of sight. In that moment, Isaiah—caught up in this relationship with God—sees his own sinfulness, his inadequacy, his incompleteness. I don’t merely want to imply “evil” here, but in the face of glory Isaiah sees how very small he is, that he is next to nothing, and that he needs something from God—be it forgiveness (that’s the image here), or something else to complete him, to make him whole, to make him worthy. And the gift is brought to him, a hot, burning coal clenched in tongs held out by a seraph, one of the angel messengers flying around. The seraph puts the hot coal to Isaiah’s lips, to burn away the dross, the unnecessary, the impure, and Isaiah is made to kiss the fire. *KISS THE FIRE!* That’s what it feels like to him. He risks death, puts his life on the line, for he could be burned to a crisp, but no matter, this is what he knows he must do, he knows it with all his heart; he knows it as surely as he has known anything in his whole life.

That’s just the beginning. Isaiah hears God musing out loud, uttering God’s own thinking in response to some immense inner question:

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah hears the question, is caught up in the cleansing and making whole that has just happened to him by the kiss of that burning coal, and he blurts out his response: “Here am I! send me.” He has lost himself and has given his whole life away in that moment. Isaiah will never be the same, and he knows it; this is something he must do.

Visions and visionary experiences don’t only happen in the throne room of heaven, or even in particularly dramatic circumstances. There are great similarities between Isaiah’s experience and that of Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus tells them to throw out their nets on the other side of the boat, and they bring in that huge haul of fish, Peter sees this as a wonder, perhaps a miracle, and he experiences the same kind of deep introspection we see in Isaiah. He realizes very clearly that he is a sinful man, or an incomplete man, someone unworthy to do as Jesus asks of him, and he asks for cleansing. In a parallel to this story, when Peter who is fishing in the boat while naked sees Jesus on the shore, he jumps into the water to hide his nakedness. Here the nakedness symbolizes that he thinks he is not enough, that he is not worthy to be called, to be trusted. Peter needs Jesus’ touch and acknowledgement to make him clean, to heal him, to make him whole, and only then can he truly hear Jesus saying, “Follow me; from now on you will be catching people, not fish.” Then Peter follows.

These stories are clearly about a call into ministry, into a direct way to serve God by means of the work one does and the life one leads. We call that vocation, and it can be either religious or secular. When it is religious, it seems that invariably the person experiences a great need for healing, for forgiveness, for being made whole. After all, how can one be about God’s business of forgiveness without having known and accepted it personally? Once in a while we meet a priest who acts like

God is lucky to get him. But even then, that is often bravado, coming out of a deep sense of insecurity.

St. Matthias is looking for a new rector, someone to serve this community in prayer and mission and service in the years to come. I hope you, particularly the search committee members, will ask the candidates to share their inner life with you, something about their sense of call, their prayer life, their sense of God's presence in and around them. Years ago, when I went through such processes, there were some churches that asked me nothing about my inner journey, and when I served in Minnesota, when I reviewed the questions the various search committees prepared for the candidates they were to interview, there was often nothing that intimate among the questions. My response to them was, "If you don't ask such questions, you deserve whatever you get." Most of them went back home and reconsidered their questions. The other part of this that is important, is to try to find a priest to express God's longings for the world as the priest sees/understands them, and not just the priest's own longings. It is a far different thing for a priest to say in a sermon, "We should do such and such," than it is to say, "I deeply believe God is calling us to do such and such." Remember, if someone is called to work for God, that work is always directed toward others, and with the intent to bring them together in peace, in justice and in love.

Let me speak briefly about vocation in general. When we are young, we discover that we have certain gifts, skills, insights, competencies, passions, and I can imagine that a person may have a vocation in any work except criminal behavior. We are fortunate to have come to the point of understanding that when a person has extraordinary gifts they must be for some purpose, they must be for the greater good of humanity, and how wonderful and blessed it is that a person may find enjoyment and fulfillment in using those gifts in particular ways. I like

to define vocation this way, that it is when the spirit of the work and the spirit of the person come together. One of the stories I remember hearing from a mentor of mine was about a train trip he was on that was long enough for him to benefit from being on a sleeping car. He noticed, during that trip, that the car he was on was wonderfully cared for, not only spotlessly clean, but so well polished that it looked like it was new. He complimented the porter as he was getting ready to leave, telling him that everything looked wonderful; “the brass just sparkles and the wood gleams!” The porter looked at him and smiled, saying, “Yes, sir! Every man has to have his glory!” What a wonderful way to describe vocation, knowing and having one’s glory! And notice that this was not a vocation that changed the world, but on how many days did he brighten the lives of those around him, those whom he served, if only for a night and a day.

In our language, glory comes in several forms. The porter was talking about doing something that he loved, could do well, and he did it with joy. The glory was the blessing of fulfillment that came from within the work, within the moment. In our day, glory is often seen primarily as prestige, or the reward of being honored as someone special, and being highly rewarded monetarily. Many get little to no satisfaction—much less fulfillment—from the work, but only in counting the rewards.

We live in a period when few clergy suffer from great want and cannot provide the best care and education their family needs, but few clergy get rich. It seems to be only those who have the magnetism of a television personality, who become, really, cult leaders, who get vastly rich while supposedly serving God. I notice, too, that the gospel they most often preach is not the gospel of Jesus Christ, but the gospel of prosperity without judgment, without responsibility, the “gospel of me-first,” and sometimes the “gospel of me and mine alone.” David Brooks wrote a brilliant piece this week on the state of the evangelical church

within Christianity which shows the current fall-out and consequences of that style of leadership. Some of the followers have totally withdrawn into themselves and their willingness to dismiss the value and reality of others, especially those who do not look like them. Others have withdrawn from their congregations with the comment that they have not lost their faith in the living God, but they think their church has.

We Episcopalians have our own problems. We do not preach enough judgement to be able to control people with fear, like “it’s a sin if you do this or that, and if you do that you are going to hell.” So we cannot say, “God’s going to get you if you don’t come to church.” We work very hard to build faith communities where people can truly say about us (we hope), “we know they are Christians by their love,”—love that is revealed by how we accept and affirm and include those who come, revealed by how we relate to and offer help in the communities in which we live and worship, revealed by a generosity of spirit and an abundance of hope, *hope*, not optimism.

Please remember that the essence of vocation is always mission, a sense of being sent to do something that needs to be done for the good of those around us and maybe even those beyond, a mission of cooperating with God to bring good to the world, not our good, but God’s good. We don’t say “yes” to vocation in order to become better persons, but rather, we remember Jesus’ saying, “Whoever loses his or her life for my sake will find it.” That’s the hard part—to be truly willing to lose life, to lose all those things we want in the now and for ourselves and to want what God wants. When seeking a priest, look for someone who at least glimpses that and is trying to live it. *Amen.*

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