

Pastor's Message – 5/26/24
Isaiah 6:1-8

Last year, some of us went off-site to the Marsh Haven Nature Center to worship and celebrate Earth Day; some of you worshipped via Livestream. The program, if you remember, was on monarch butterflies and I took milkweed seeds home with me, built planters in the backyard of the Parsonage, and planted those milkweed seeds. I was pleased to see those plants appear this year. And then, last week I think it was, I saw a monarch butterfly in the backyard, and I smiled about that.

This past Tuesday night, I stood in the front window watching the storm roll in. The sky grew darker and darker, lightning flashed, thunder rolled, the tornado sirens went off at least four times and there were warnings on the television and my phone. I was tense and anxious, ready to scoop up my cat and head downstairs into the basement if necessary.

I was reflecting on those events in preparing for this sermon – reflecting on how we can often see God's glory and power in both the little things of nature and the power and danger of nature. Maybe you do too; maybe you've had other experiences.

Standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon, climbing up Lookout Mountain in the Smokies, settling into your seat at the Broadway show you've been longing to see, walking up the path to meet a relative you didn't know you had, Isaiah finding himself in the throne room of heaven in the presence of the Lord of creation. Awe-inspiring, terrifying, humbling, overwhelming. Capturing something of Isaiah's experience is not impossible for us. Observing the glories of creation can usher a person of faith into the presence of the Creator. Encountering a powerful artistic expression designed to bring us into a new way of seeing the world can be a transformative revelation.

Our experiences may not be the same as what Isaiah experienced or maybe they are. Isaiah encounters the presence of God, but not a face-to-face meeting. and Isaiah sees only the hem of the robe, which fills the temple. We have detailed descriptions of the beings that flew around this presence, but nothing of significance of what Isaiah actually saw of the Lord. Maybe he didn't want to say, cautious about making an idol of his words. Or perhaps he was simply too overwhelmed to come up with ways to describe the presence before him. Or, most likely, God was careful not to reveal too much in this vision, as with Moses on the mountain when God hedged on the whole "face-to-face" thing out of protection for the frailty of humanity, we might assume.

Whatever he saw was enough to shake him to his core. "Woe is me," he cries. Woe. An understatement, but Isaiah feels unqualified to be in God's presence, much less praise God. That the prophet was able to see only the "hem of his [God's] robe" is meant to suggest the gargantuan, superhuman size of the Lord. No wonder he is overwhelmed and overcome with awe and fear. Not only does the hem of God's robe fill the temple, "the whole earth is full of his glory:" monarch butterflies and severe thunderstorms included.

Isaiah's experience reminds us that the sometimes-overwhelming presence of God is found not only in the extraordinary, but in the ordinary as well. God can be as

profoundly present in the sunset over a mountain peak as he is in a church or cathedral. He can reveal himself in a concert hall as vitally as he might in a moment of prayer. More important than where we are is our willingness to see God in what is going on around us. Isaiah was engaged in an ordinary service of worship – an ordinary Sunday worship service. How often do we plan and show up to worship expecting to encounter God? It feels like the *right* answer should be, “Every week!” I try to create an environment every Sunday in which we can experience God’s presence; I’m not sure how often I succeed. Maybe it’s not completely up to me. I expect many of us would prefer not to be scared witless by the glory of God as Isaiah was in today’s passage. Or, at the very least, we’d like some warning so we can be prepared! And yet, isn’t that at least part of what worship is about, just showing up and expecting to encounter God?

I wonder if we are too content, too accustomed with the commonplace: with life, with career, with family. We have settled into a comfortable, if not totally satisfactory, routine of living. To be sure, we need God, but only to clean up around the edges of life. We certainly don't need his radical presence that might reveal the inadequacies of our neatly manicured existence. And worship is fine as long as it helps us feel good about who we are and what we have accomplished or if it confines its focus to how others can reach our level of spiritual well-being.

Isaiah’s experience suggests that meeting God should shake us up. However, God does not reveal his radical presence simply to overwhelm us or to make us feel worthless. Rather, he wishes by that presence to remind us of his empowering grace that meets and transforms our awareness of personal inadequacy. No sooner had Isaiah confessed his own and his generation's uncleanness, than God impressed on him the grace that forgives sins. For Isaiah, when human inadequacy was met by divine grace, worship happened.

This God of the universe does not want anyone to face wrath and justice. "God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Thus, although God is just and God's justice demands that evildoers receive their just reward, God offers everyone, including evildoers, a path to redemption. God provides this cross-shaped loophole because God's essential nature is pure, white-hot, all-encompassing, blinding love. God is love (see 1 John 4). God loves. God loves the world. God loves the natural world. God loves the mountains and lakes, the meadow and its flowers, the deer and the rabbits. God loves saints and sinners alike. God loves children. God loves us when we're good and when we're bad, when we're happy and when we're sad. In fact, there's no power in the galaxy that can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39).

Isaiah's memorable experience invites us to be awestruck by the majestic presence of the Holy God, to take stock of our own lives, to be transformed by God's purifying touch and to act in response to overhearing the divine. Isaiah’s experience calls us to reexamine the God whom we think we know and the God whom we think we want. We sometimes create a God in our own image.

Sometimes we create a god who bargains, transacts, and seals the deal. If I do A, then god does B. If I behave, then I'll be loved. If I mess up, I'll make god angry. If I

work hard, I'll earn forgiveness. If I'm the best, I'll earn a blessing.

Sometimes we imagine a god whose omnipotence guarantees my safety -- the god who spares the children, cures the cancer, stops the rapist, and defuses the bomb.

Sometimes we create a god whose perfect will controls everything -- the god who secures parking spots, pay raises, soccer victories and SAT scores.

Sometimes we create a god who makes faith easy -- by providing answers, erasing doubts, planting signs and peddling miracles; by coming when called, and leaving when we don't need God anymore.

An experience of God happens, worship happens whenever a grateful response answers a divine call. After all these years of reading this passage, I learned something new this week. God's question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" was not directed to Isaiah, but rather to the seraphim. Isaiah simply overheard the question and immediately stepped forward. Why ever would he volunteer for a job he knew nothing about but knew he was inadequate?

Isaiah might have waited until more information was forthcoming before he volunteered. What could have prompted such a seemingly rash response? Gratitude! Gratitude for God's grace. Gratitude for God's forgiveness of sin. Gratitude for the experience of God's presence unlike anything he had known before. Gratitude that leads to action is the appropriate response to God's actions in the lives of his people.

Ask a roomful of kindergarteners for a volunteer, and almost every hand will shoot up in the air. Some of them will practically jump up and down, wanting so badly to be chosen. Compare that to a group of high schoolers; or, better yet, a group of adults. "May I have a volunteer?" Silence. Uneasy glances. Finally, one person signals -- not a hand in the air, but maybe a quick wave, like he's at an auction. It's an "I-guess-I'll-do-it" gesture. On the inside, he might be as excited as one of those kindergarteners, stretching his arm toward the stars in hopes that he will be chosen; but as an adult, it's cool to slide by -- to say, "If there's no one else...." Outward excitement isn't something we encourage so much in adults.

Isaiah and most of the prophets in the Bible typically were "lay people," in the sense that they had no authorized position within the religious hierarchy. Most of them weren't priests. Their authority and their call rested in their relationship with God, which they could claim from their encounters with and experience of God. Isaiah's experience of God compels him to raise his hand and volunteer, "Here I am. Send me!"

We make a big deal of responding to God's call. It is odd. We do not make a big deal of responding to a telephone call. The phone rings, and we answer. We get an email from friends or a Facebook post or a Snapchat or ... from them, and we respond. If these technologies have their way with us, drive us to act, why wouldn't God's call evoke a response? We give ourselves little credit for answering the phone, for responding to emails and Facebook entries. In all these cases, the importance of the caller and the means used, prod us to respond.

I once read something from Dr. Tony Campolo, Baptist pastor and sociologist, which has stuck with me. he told story of a young woman named Nancy who gratefully responded to God's movement of grace.

Although Nancy has a handicapping condition and is confined to a wheelchair, she has an extraordinary ministry. Every week, in the personals section of her local newspaper, she runs an ad that reads, "If you are lonely or have a problem, call me. I am in a wheelchair, and I seldom get out. We can share our problems with each other. I'd love to talk." She spends much of her day on the telephone talking with the more than thirty lonely and discouraged people who call each week. When Campolo asked how she came to be confined to a wheelchair, Nancy revealed that she had tried to commit suicide by jumping from the balcony of her apartment. Instead of dying, however, she ended up in a hospital room paralyzed from the waist down. One night in the hospital, she said, Jesus came to her and very clearly said, "You have had a healthy body and a crippled soul. From this day on you will have a crippled body, but you will have a healthy soul." She said, "I gave my life to Jesus that night in that hospital room, and I knew that if I kept a healthy soul, it would mean that I would have to help other people. And so I do."

No one so touched by God can remain still. No one who has experienced the grace of God can remain silent. No one who hears in their heart the divine call for service can do anything less than respond with gratitude, "Here am I; send me!" And in moments like this, worship happens.

"Pick Me! Pick Me!" This is the cry of the playground when two captains emerge and pick classmates to be on their team before the teams engage in some playground contest. Perhaps you stood around when you were a kid, waiting to be picked. "Pick me! Pick me!" And perhaps you were passed over. "I want to be on your side," you say to one of the captains. Still nothing happens. And so on. You remember. Today, the good news is that God has picked us. God has "sent" us in response to our cry, "Here am I, Lord, send me!"

It is in the presence of God, an awesome, frightening presence that we realize that God does not choose the equipped; God equips the chosen. There is an unadvertised job for every follower of Jesus who has stood in the presence of God and overheard "Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?"

It is one thing to be aware of the Presence in an amazing encounter or mountaintop experience, it is quite another to be guided every day by that same Presence. To become familiar with and open to God's all-consuming Presence is a lifelong discipleship journey. Knowing and serving God are two sides of the same experience. Some start with the knowing; after some profound experience of God's presence, they then move into a state of willingness to serve, to be sent. Others start with serving and then discover the God they are serving in the act itself, seeing God through those with whom they minister. Either way, it can be a humbling and energizing experience.

However we hear the call, wherever we hear the call, there is a job that God calls you to, a job that you will be equipped to do when you respond. Being in God's presence and answering the call is worship: an act of praise and thanksgiving. Answering the call brings us closer to God's love and forgiveness.