

Ash Wednesday - 2023
Isaiah 6:1-8
Romans 10:14-17

We've all seen situations which we thought were hopeless or beyond redemption. I saw an ad: "FOR SALE: WEDDING GOWN, NEVER USED. SIZE 10, IVORY. COST \$550.00, ASKING \$225.00 (TELEPHONE NUMBER)." For whatever reason, all hope is gone.

From our Bible reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah tonight, we join Isaiah in the temple, standing with the priests between the porch and the altar, watching the drama of ceremony and worship, of words and music. It took on a personal meaning for Isaiah. The temple scene faded and there came a vision. In the vision, Isaiah saw the indescribable Yahweh. The language of the account is borrowed from the state and the temple. Not Uzziah now, but Yahweh is on the throne. His attendants are supernatural beings, the seraphim. They protect themselves, with wings, from the glory of Yahweh. They call out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!" That call was not an announcement of the morality of God, but his uniqueness, his wholly otherness, his transcendence. The experience of the temple trembling and the smoke stressed the otherness of God. Isaiah becomes stricken with unworthiness.

In the presence of God, at the contemplation of God, we, too, can be driven to sense our humanness, our mortality. We are reminded of our frailty and our sins, "I am a man of unclean lips," Isaiah confesses. "I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips!" In this passage we see Isaiah struggling with the sin of "I'm not good enough."

We are there with Isaiah. We all screw up. We all say and do things we wish we hadn't done. We all hurt others. Sometimes on purpose. Sometimes without intending to. "No one is righteous, no not one," God's Word reminds us (Romans 3:10). You and I, like Isaiah, often feel a sense of low or no self-worth. We think, "Who am I, God, that you would want to send me? I can't share your message of hope with others. I'm not good enough. I'm in bondage to sin and I cannot free myself." We are all in need of God's forgiveness ... and of God's grace.

We have a constant need for purification. Whether it is of the lips, or the feet, or the hand, the heart, the thought, there is need for cleansing. Is it maybe at crisis times in our lives, or in our families, or in our nation and world that we are most conscious of our frailties and sins? God uses especially these critical times to address us. When we think the end for us has come, God gives a new beginning. When the difficult times come, the days of extreme guilt or remorse; when the sins of the hour, the day, or a life-time weigh heavy on us, and we pronounce our own "woes" upon ourselves, and beg freedom from them, God has a word for us. It is a word of forgiveness.

When Jesus walked this earth, again and again, he engaged people, inviting them into relationship with him. Sometimes in those relationships he comforted the disturbed; sometimes in those relationships he disturbed the comfortable. He related to each one, knowing what lay in the heart of each.

Then and now Jesus is the reality of God's amazing grace.

Grace is a peculiar concept in our world where nothing is free, and strings are always attached. In our world we stress working hard, striving to achieve, getting what you deserve, making your own way, self-help. In God's world, Amazing Grace is offered without cost.

Sensing his forgiveness and call, Isaiah responded. "Here am I! Send me." Though this marked the beginning of a clear call to a prophetic ministry for him, the response is expected of all those who have experienced the purifying effect of God's forgiveness, whatever their vocation may be. The message of a God of love is to be heard from a television technician, a car mechanic, and a tomato grower, a retired person or a youngster still in high school or college, as well as from a pastor of a church. It is the experience of forgiveness that makes us witnesses. Yet we don't see people standing in line, saying, "Send me." Maybe it is because we do not sense our forgiveness, or because we have never confessed. We are unfit for the task of telling until we are pardoned, and once we are pardoned, we have the task!

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul writes to them and to us a strange phrase, quoting Isaiah in 52:7, "How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!" It is strange enough to call feet beautiful. Most often we think of feet in a much more utilitarian context, as something we stand on and walk on, our basic support for standing upright. It is less about the messenger and more about the message.

In our Bible reading for tonight, Isaiah recognizes that he is in the presence of holiness -- but in the chaotic and troubled modern world we live in, it's becoming increasingly difficult to have a sense of holiness. So, those who respond to God's Amazing Grace of forgiveness, the good news of peace and hope helps the world and the people around you in your everyday world know God's Amazing Grace as well.

A minister found himself in the line waiting for Saint Peter's attention at the Pearly Gates. He was behind a guy dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, jeans, and a leather jacket, and wearing sunglasses. Finally Saint Peter addressed the man in the outlandish costume, "Who are you, so I might know what to do with you?"

"I'm Joe Green, a New York taxi driver."

After a moment consulting his list, Saint Peter broke into a big smile and gave the taxi driver a silken robe and a golden staff along with a hearty welcome.

The minister announced, "I'm Harold Snow, head pastor at St. Mary's for the last 43 years."

Saint Peter consulted his list, provided a thin cotton robe, a wooden staff, and jerked his thumb, indicating the minister should enter. Not too clear about this treatment, the minister asked the reason.

"We work by results here," Saint Peter replied. "When you preached, people slept; when he drove, people prayed."

In reality, we act as witnesses to the good news in our lives every day, where we find ourselves, acting the way we act. Not in some spectacular fashion, but in the normal actions which make up our daily lives.

We witness in that way, in the places where we are. We witness with our actions, with our lives, and with our feet, made beautiful by God's Amazing Grace. Amen.