

Awe and Action

We sang it, earlier this morning: “Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! / All Thy works shall praise Thy Name, in earth, and sky, and sea; / Holy, holy, holy; merciful and mighty! / God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!” We heard it in the Scripture I just read: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Those who grew up in a more liturgical Christian tradition may immediately associate it with the words before Communion: “Holy, holy, holy Lord, / God of power and might, / heaven and earth are full of your glory.” And those of us of a certain age remember it as both a commonly used adjective by a famous baseball announcer (“Holy cow!”) and as part of the catchphrase of the young sidekick of a certain Caped Crusader: “Holy (bad pun of the moment), Batman!” But what is holy? What does it mean in the Bible and in our experience? What difference does it make in our lives? Our Scriptures this morning give us pictures first of one prophet’s experience of the holiness of God and then of the ongoing revelation of the holiness of Jesus of Nazareth, one of the epiphanous moments that marked him as the Son of the Living God, the Anointed One, the Christ. Our Scriptures also point us toward how the holy may be experienced in our lives and what our ultimate response to it may be.

What is Holy? The dictionary tells us that it refers to things “dedicated to religious use; belonging to or coming from God.” In relation to God, it points to God’s purity and the respect or awe which God is due. But that doesn’t really answer the question very well. It reminds me of the words of the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who opined in an infamous case that he couldn’t define the subject but that he knew it when he saw it.

I think we also know the Holy when we see it, when we feel it, when we hear it. Some of us receive glimpses of the Holy in certain places, perhaps what my Celtic ancestors called “thin places,” places where the barrier between Heaven and Earth, between the divine and the mundane seems almost transparently thin. It may be a cathedral or an alpine meadow, a trickling spring or a roaring cataract. Whenever we go to that place, we feel a touch of the presence of God. Some perceive the Holy in music. Later this morning, we’ll hear two settings of the *Sanctus*, the Latin version of the words from the Mass that I quoted a moment ago: “Holy, holy, holy Lord, / God of power and might, / heaven and earth are full of your glory.” Listeners have often attributed a touch of the Holy to the two composers, Mozart and Bach, and we’ll hear how their mighty music touches us at Communion time. Some see glimpses of the Holy in visual arts – I always feel that special thrill when looking at the work of El Greco. For you it may be something I’ve not mentioned but we all seem to know the Holy when we encounter it.

I don’t remember if I was introduced to it in Seminary or if I’d stumbled upon it on my own previously but the work of the German theologian Rudolf Otto has been enormously helpful to me in my own understanding of the Holy. From the time I first read of Otto’s work, I found it resonated deeply with my own experience. In his 1917 book, *Das Heilige*, translated as The Idea of the Holy, Otto uses the word *numinous* to describe the Holy. He writes that it is “non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self.” Otto borrowed the term *vouyev* from Greek philosophy, where it was used to describe the “unknowable reality underlying all things.” The numinous, Otto wrote, is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – a mystery that is both terrifying and fascinating. When we encounter something numinous, something Holy, we feel awe, a sort of profound unease; we feel overpowered and humble; and we are filled with intense energy. Otto says that this reaction to the numinous is “The deepest and most fundamental element in all strong and sincerely felt religious emotion,”

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and is to be found “in strong, sudden ebullitions of personal piety, ... in the fixed and ordered solemnities of rites and liturgies, and again in the atmosphere that clings to old religious monuments and buildings, to temples and to churches.” Otto says that our experience of the Holy may “come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship” or be “thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its ‘profane’, non-religious mood of everyday experience” or that it may even erupt “from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions” and lead to “the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy.”

A more recent writer has a sort of oblique definition of the Holy that I dearly love. In her 1982 book, Teaching a Stone to Talk, Annie Dillard writes, “On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does any-one have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

We can certainly derive Otto’s or Dillard’s understandings of the Holy as the terrifying and fascinating mystery from the experiences of Isaiah and of Simon Peter. It is easy to perceive the *tremendum* in Isaiah’s experience: he perceives God as a figure so enormous that the mere hem of God’s robe fills the Temple, the largest building known to Isaiah. In at least one strand of Jewish tradition, the Seraphim are understood as “fiery serpents”—think of the fire-breathing, flying dragons of both Eastern and Western myth and saga. I don’t think I’d have any trouble being terrified by such an encounter.

We may have to read a little more closely to catch what so terrifies Simon Peter. He is a professional fisherman and has just returned to shore with his colleagues after a long night of net fishing, which is how such things were done on the Sea of Galilee at that time. He is accosted by Jesus, whom he knows as a teacher who has healed his mother-in-law and done other healings. The Rabbi asks him to take him out a little ways so he can use his boat as a pulpit from which to address the gathered throng. Simon would have been tired after his hard night’s work but probably figured he owed the Rabbi this favor for healing his wife’s mother. Simon may have dozed a bit in the boat as Jesus taught. He may have been secretly glad to get the excuse to be lazy while his partners were busy washing and stowing the nets. When Jesus finished speaking, Simon probably stirred himself to prepare to row the short distance back to shore but Jesus surprised him by asking him to row out and try for another catch. I think it’s a tribute to Simon Peter’s essential good nature that after a long and fruitless night he acquiesced so easily to what must have seemed like a really silly request. Fishing at that time was done at night in part because the fish could see the coarse nets during the day and simply avoided them. Clearly, this wandering teacher who’d been a carpenter didn’t know anything about commercial fishing! When Simon began to pull in fish in this unexpected way, he must have first been amused and then delighted. But when the fish kept coming and kept coming, so that his nets ripped under their weight and his boat threatened to capsize, and the Teacher just sat in the gunwales and

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smiled his enigmatic smile, Simon grew terrified! Only one sent by God could control nature in this un-natural way.

Experiences like Isaiah's and Simon Peter's are rare. In our own lives we may have only one or perhaps a handful of experiences with which to compare them. I hope that we all have frequent experiences of warmth and comfort when we come to church or even occasional times when the Holy that we encounter in this place is so powerful as to make the hairs stand up on the backs of our necks. But experiences that make us fall to our knees in awe of what we are encountering and in full knowledge of our own smallness, inadequacy or sinfulness are and must be rare. We simply could not bear such close encounters with the Holy on a regular basis. The majesty of God may make us say with Isaiah, "woe is me for I am undone!" Or, like Simon Peter, we may whisper, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" When we encounter the Living God, we may wish for our crash helmets or we may, upon contact with the Love that excels all loves, be "lost in wonder, love and praise," as Charles Wesley foretold in the lyric of his great hymn. But, in fact, as appropriate as those expressions of awe and humility are, they are not ultimately what God wants from us when we encounter the Holy.

Our two Scriptures this morning are not only glimpses into human experience with the Holiness of God but also templates of the response such an experience should elicit. Both Isaiah and Simon Peter go from amazement at the Presence of God to readiness at the call of God. Both hear first a word of reassurance and then a divine request. In response to Isaiah's lament that he is a man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips, the seraph purifies him and comforts him: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Likewise, Jesus calms the fears of the big fisherman: "Do not be afraid" – surely the most common word in the Bible after humans are touched by the nearness of God. Once the good news of God's loving intent is given, human ears are ready to hear the call. Isaiah says, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"" Luke's Gospel records the words of Jesus to Simon: "from now on you will be catching people."

Our encounters with the Holy are meant to elicit a response from us, a response not merely to the experience itself but also to the calling implicit in that experience. When God taps us on the shoulder, it is not to frighten us or to impress us but to ask for our help. In the great plan of God, we are the ones charged with reminding each other of God's loving presence, we are the ones called to gather the Beloved Community. Our callings are as unique to us as we are as individuals whom God has created. When I was a boy, I heard a lot about "the call to full-time Christian Service," by which was meant the calling to be a pastor or a missionary or some other clergy role. But in point of fact, we are all called to full-time Christian Service. Being a follower of Jesus the Christ is a full-time endeavor and I don't just mean 40 hours a week. We are called to carry the Good News of God's love into our relationships at work, at home, at school, at play. Some of us, God calls to be parents; some not. Some, God calls to be partners; some not. God calls us to interact with the world as accountants, teachers, lawyers, carpenters, electricians, business people of all sorts, for in all of these fields and in any other you would care to name, we have the ability to touch people with God's justice and mercy, with God's love and hope.

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We are called by God as surely as Isaiah and Simon Peter were called and we should look to them as models for response. Isaiah, without even hearing the specifics of his call, said, “Here am I; send me!” Simon Peter and his partners James and John may not have understood Jesus’ little joke about catching people instead of fish but as soon as soon as they got to shore, they left everything – their boats that they’d worked so hard to acquire, their nets that they’d just laboriously cleaned, even that amazing record catch of fish that surely would have brought a healthy day’s pay or more at the market – and they followed him. Just like that. We’re not often called to drop everything, to walk away from our belongings and our businesses to follow Jesus, but what if we were? Would our experience of the Holy win out over our desire for the things our society tells us are important?

Every worship leader knows that we cannot create experiences of the Holy by means of our will and our techniques. If we could, we would come into the Sunday morning service carrying armloads of crash helmets, as Annie Dillard suggests. We cannot summon God; we can only prepare ourselves and those who worship with us to recognize the presence of God who is with us always. And so we read together from the Book we believe was inspired by God and we sing songs that are meaningful to us, whose images call to our minds the truths about God that we have learned and experienced. We ask God to open our eyes to God’s presence, not enough perhaps that we are awe-struck but just enough to be able to remember the experience through the week. And we perform acts that resonate across the millennia to the life of Jesus – we baptize, occasionally we anoint, and regularly we gather with the fruit of the vine and with bread to remember the night that Jesus celebrated the Passover with his friends. As Baptists, we do not look for holiness in the elements, in the generic grape juice and “artisanal” bread of the grocery store, but rather we find it in the shared experience, in the act of coming together as a church family and the knowledge that we are thus connecting with what Peter later called the “holy nation” of God’s people around the world and across the centuries as well as with the Holy One whom we remember during this season as the Light of the World. As we contemplate the elements of our symbolic feast, I invite you to remember the times in your life when you have been touched by the Holiness of God, by the Mystery that is both terrifying and fascinating, and as we remember let us ask ourselves, “Am I following God’s call upon my life? Have I said, “Here am I, Lord. Send me!”?”

For centuries, many of our brothers and sisters have used the time before communion to recall the Holiness of God with these words, first in Latin and now in their native tongue:

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus

Dominus Deus Sabaoth.

Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua.

Hosanna in excelsis.

Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.

Hosanna in excelsis.

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts:

Heaven and earth are full of thy glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.