

THE DIVINE TOUCH

ISAIAH 6: 1-8

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University Church of Chicago

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The erstwhile pastor of the City Church in New York City, Maurice Boyd, tells of a Saturday afternoon conversation he had with the best man as they waited for the bride to arrive and her wedding to begin. “He must have felt some pressure to talk religious faith, for he volunteered the information that he had once been a man of faith but had surrendered it in face of war, pestilence and all the troubles of the world. His assured tone and arch demeanor suggested that he considered his position unassailable, that he thought himself more sensitive and more intelligent than those of us who still managed to keep a hold on faith in spite of the difficulties he mentioned.”

Having met this young man’s counterpart many times myself, let me tell you how prescient is Maurice’s description of him. “He seemed to think that his unbelief meant that he felt the world’s anguish more keenly than believers did, that his mind was too perceptive to be persuaded by the explanations that satisfied those of us with smaller brains.”

So Maurice asked him how many books he had read on the subject of God and evil; and when he said that he had not read any, and, moreover, had not talked to anyone about it at any great length or in any depth, Dr. Boyd replied that his faith must not have meant much to him if he could surrender it so easily. “He really ought not assume that in this matter he held the moral and intellectual high ground, for truth to tell, his skepticism lacked seriousness and would not enjoy much credibility among thoughtful people.

Being informed as he was, the young man must have known that keener minds and kinder hearts than his or mine had wrestled long and hard with the problem of evil and had better things to say about it than either of us had ever thought of. Did they not deserve a hearing? Did he feel the pain of the world more than, say, Mother Teresa? Had he thought about it with greater anguish than Job or Jesus, or more profoundly than Augustine or Aquinas or Kierkegaard; or in more menacing circumstances than Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Viktor Frankl?”

The conversation having become more serious than he bargained for, the young man began looking for a way out. The bride gave him one by arriving only a little late, radiant and joyful, blissfully unaware of the pains of existence, totally convinced that this was the happiest of days in the best of all possible worlds.

The story of the call of Isaiah—no matter how many times we hear it or preach from it—discovers afresh the mystery, power and surrender at the heart of our vocation as God’s people. Isaiah 6 reports a vision in which the prophet is commissioned to deliver a message.

The Greek philosopher Epictetus, a Stoic, once said that everything has two handles. By one handle you can carry it; but the other handle you cannot. He gives us an instance of what he means. If your friend offends you, you cannot carry the relationship by the handle of the offense. If you brood on the offence, the estrangement between you and your friend will grow. But you can carry it by reminding yourself that the other person is your brother or sister. Carry the estrangement by the handle of your love and you have some hope of reconciliation.

There are two handles to this very familiar story. One is the call of Isaiah, the dramatic story in which the prophet sees God, "sitting on a throne, high and lofty." The seraphs in the temple call to one another, saying,

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory."

One of the seraphs flies to Isaiah, holding a live coal that has been taken from the altar. "The seraph touched my mouth with it and said, 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of God saying, 'Whom shall I send and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me.'"

The other handle of the story is more difficult. The message itself is not what the people of Judah want to hear; it is a prophecy that will mean that they will inevitably suffer the consequences of God's judgment. In the two chapters that follow this telling of God's call, Isaiah fails to convince Judah that the danger seemingly posed by their neighbors will soon fade. If they overreact, they will set in motion Judah's eventual destruction by a far more dangerous and distant foe. Only a small remnant will be spared to begin anew when this enemy is ousted.

"The Inklings" were a group of scholars at Oxford (the one in England, not the one in Mississippi) who regularly met for conversation and companionship. They met in a pub called "The Eagle and the Child" but known colloquially as "The Bird and the Baby." It was there that C. S. Lewis first read to the Inklings *The Screwtape Letters* and J.R.R. Tolkien first read *The Hobbit*. They met through the decade of the 1930's, including the anxious months when it seemed that a German invasion of Britain was imminent. In light of that, they resolved to go through all their writings to discover how much of their work would be condemned by the Nazis. They did this not from cowardice but from curiosity, to determine which writings would declare their Christian faith against the encroaching darkness of fascism.

It's a good exercise for all of us. How secret is our discipleship? If we were accused in a court of law of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us? Would our children testify that we discussed the faith at home? Would our co-workers testify that we were known for living at our religious beliefs at work? There are people who, if they were accused of being members of University Church, would be acquitted because the evidence would be insufficient to convict them. Some people pay more on restaurants than they give to the work of the church. Some people are like the woman I knew who complained that every time she came to church, we sang "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today." Or like the man who said his church is in a rut, because every time he goes, they have a Christmas tree in the chancel. A court of law would have to give them the benefit of the doubt. They would never be convicted of being church members.

It is to such people that Isaiah is called to prophesy.

The real enemy of faith is not doubt, but fear. As Paul Tillich remarked, “Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt is part of a lively, inquiring faith.” Doubt is the cutting edge by which we learn and grow. The real enemy is fear. We are so afraid that we refuse to think new thoughts, and we become so careful and set in our ways that we are hemmed in by anxiety and timidity.

Indeed, the real enemy of faith is not even sin, but fear. Dr. Frederick Greaves once wrote a book about sin in which he counted the number of occasions, allowing for duplication in the Gospels, on which Jesus mentioned sin. Greaves discovered that Jesus used the noun six times and the verb three times. But Bishop Stephen Neill tells of a very methodical German scholar who went through the Scriptures and discovered that ninety-nine times the words “Fear not!” echo and re-echo throughout the Bible.

Summoned to the throne of God and surrounded by the awe and terror of the Lord, Isaiah is struck with the realization of his own unworthiness and that of his people. He is not worthy to stand before God, yet here he is in God’s presence. He knows he is unworthy to serve, yet what other option does he have? This is not the time to say no; it is the time, in Isaiah’s words, to say “Woe is me! I am lost.” There is a deep mystery at work in this moment and it upsets Isaiah’s equilibrium.

Notice that worship is the setting of Isaiah’s call. Belief, theology and vocational calling take wing out of the worship experience. The voice of God speaks throughout the worship service—in the music, the prayers, the banners and candles as well as the sermon. The sermon is a piece within the whole of Christian worship.

And God also speaks in the silence. This story of Isaiah’s call can leave out some seekers in the congregation. Some of you are not necessarily skeptics who doubt the veracity of Isaiah-like mystical encounters with the living God, but your own religious experience does not include thunderous voices and winged messengers. In fact, for some of us God is mostly and too often silent.

There are many good reasons why some of us have a hard time hearing God. I suspect that it’s difficult for the congregants at Messiah Lutheran Church in Wichita, Kansas, to hear God’s voice in the liturgy today when they are grieving the fact that an anti-abortion fanatic could walk into their church last Sunday and kill one of the ushers, Dr. George Tiller. Writing in the April issue of Harper’s magazine, my friend Tom Geoghegan wonders, “In a Whitman mood, I try to guess from each face (as I walk through the Loop) who’s being hauled into court to pay off a debt...The number of collection cases before the circuit court of Cook County came to over 130,000” last year. That’s double the number of cases in 2000. Stand for a few minutes in the emergency room of any major hospital and watch the triage of patients being admitted—which ones get immediate attention, which ones can wait, which can linger for sometimes hours.

Isaiah is called not only to speak the truth to God’s people but to live among them as one who is called to care. Faith is not an isolated, personal experience. True faith compels us to enter with love into the lives of those who need us. The first great commandment, to love God with all our hearts and minds and strength is always paired with the second, to love others as much as we love ourselves. The heart of

hypocrisy is to believe we are called to the first and can ignore the second. Again and again the Bible, tradition, the plight of the displaced and disinherited as well as those unlikable friends who plague our consciences bring us back to the truth that “caring the greatest thing, caring matters most.”

E. B. White wrote a lovely paragraph: “If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world, and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

In her book, *Saint-Watching*, Phyllis MGINley wrote about the Jesuits. When Ignatius Loyola and his band of nine fellow monks arrived in Rome glittering with degrees—some were even doctors of divinity--in 1537, Pope Paul III was disdainful of their request to be called a religious order. The pope was not impressed with them. And then came the winter of 1538, a terrible season, the worst in Roman memory. These ten people “took on themselves the burden of the city’s destitute. They put the sick into their own beds, begged straw pallets and food for the rest, and at times had as many as three or four hundred crowded into a ramshackle residence which was all they could afford. So spectacular were their efforts that even the Pope could no longer ignore them, and in 1540 he granted them the right to term themselves a genuine religious brotherhood.”

In other words, learning is so important and love is much more important. The acquisition of knowledge is second to its use, or in the old Calvinist phrase, “Truth is in order to goodness.”

C. S. Lewis describes what can be expected if one is to become a Christian. “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what God is doing. God is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof, and so on. But presently, God starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is God up to? The explanation is that God is building quite a different house from the one you thought of, throwing up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage. But God is building a palace. God intends to come and live in it.”

Our God is too small, and if God is going to live with us, we are going to have to stretch our hearts, open our minds and strengthen our souls. God cannot lodge in a narrow mind. God cannot lodge in a small heart. To accommodate God, our cottages have to give way to palaces. We are always becoming followers of Jesus Christ. We are never there, never a completed product.

This church building was purposely constructed so that seraphim and angels and thrones and altars with smoke could not intrude on the worship experience designed by Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, that simplicity would combine with Gothic stone to awaken us to God’s presence and demands. The traditional Flanders fields rows of pews were changed into the present open space in 1968-69 so that we could be more communal and flexible in our worship.

Thus, we find God speaking to us in this unique space among this diverse people. God is calling us to stretch and bend and become and change. And, most of all, to follow God’s Son.