

“Why on earth do you want to be a pastor?” A life-long friend posed that question to me a few years ago over coffee in a crowded Berlin café. She went on “I mean, don’t you get bored in church?” I had to think about that. “Honestly? Yeah, sometimes,” I said. “But when the liturgy or the choral performance, or even the praise band gets it right, worship makes us aware that we are in the presence of God”. Like the choir sang at the beginning of the service – surely God is in this place.

One of my favorite writers, Annie Dillard warns us about taking the matter of worship so lightly. In her characteristically bold way she writes,

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone 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 chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet gloves to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.¹

That may not be our experience of worship, but it was certainly Isaiah’s in the world of this morning’s Old Testament lesson. Something happened in the Jerusalem Temple that changed him. Isaiah finds himself in the midst of a worship service and like Fozzie says to Kermit in the Muppet Movie, “it sure ain’t Presbyterian”.

The temple in Jerusalem, as you know, was a big deal. It was the very symbol of God’s presence with his people. This particular temple is the one that Solomon built – massive and ornate. There is a sense in the theology of Israel that God is somehow bound to the temple – it is God’s house – the place where God dwells. When it is destroyed, everything Israel knows is thrown into question. Is God powerless to defend his own house? But Isaiah’s vision points us to the limitations of this so-called temple theology. God is bigger than the temple that Israel has built to house him. So grand, in fact, that the hem of his robe fills the temple. He may be present in the temple, but he is not constrained by it. Seraphs are in his presence, and while they cannot even look at the glory of the Lord, they are compelled to worship: “Holy, holy, holy is the lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.”

Imagine walking into a planetarium from a busy street. Suddenly the lights grow dim, the clanging sounds of the outside world melt away and the whole universe begins to open up overhead. The earth becomes a pale blue dot and we, who think so much of ourselves, become the smallest of creatures. And in that moment we are compelled to focus on the greatness, the goodness, and the grace of God. I imagine something of this sort happened in the temple with Isaiah – he beholds God’s glory and the temple begins to shake

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (NY: Harper & Row, 1982) p. 40

at its foundations, it fills with smoke and he realizes he is in the presence of Almighty God. How do you imagine you would feel if your experience of worship brought you to a place where God was so near? Exhilarated? Rapturous? Transcendent? Awe-struck? Terrified.

One of John Calvin's greatest contributions to theology was his insight that knowledge of self and knowledge of God are so closely linked together. The first paragraph of his *Institutes* begins with the heading: *Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God*. He goes on to explain that since "our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God...our very poverty better discloses the infinitude of benefits reposing in God."² Knowledge of self, according to Calvin, is essentially knowledge of the misery of the human condition. Once we see our own ruin, we are compelled to look elsewhere for salvation. That may confirm your image of Calvin as a dour French spoilsport, but it's a pretty profound psychological insight.

The reverse is also true. In the next paragraph, Calvin tells us "it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating [God] to scrutinize himself."³ Either way – there's a long descent from the holiness of God to the poverty of humanity. True knowledge of the one provides the framework for true knowledge of the other.

But I wonder how many of us undergo regular self-examination? It is far easier to engage in self-deception. What would you see if it were possible to hold up a mirror to your soul? If the vices and virtues of humanity are the only criteria we use for evaluating our actions, then it's not difficult to conclude that folks like you and me can't possibly be that bad. Given the sheer amount of wickedness and evil that people have brought to each other, we who generally are pretty nice, don't really have much cause to examine our consciences.

One of my seminary friends recently said that one of the main differences between the Christianity of the last century and the Christianity of this one will be that we no longer think about guilt or judgment (a good thing in his estimation). I told him, you might *think* you don't believe in judgment, but you do. Everyone does. We just pretend that it doesn't apply to us or the people we like.

Albert Camus, the French writer, created a powerful, worldly character for his novel *The Fall*. Here's what that character says:

People hasten to judge in order not to be judged themselves... Each of us insists on being innocent at all costs, even if he has to accuse the whole human race and heaven itself... the essential thing is that we remain innocent... As I told you, it's a matter of dodging judgment...⁴

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion I.1*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1975) p. 35-36

³ *Ibid*, p. 37

⁴ Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O'Brien (NY: Vintage Books, 1991). The character's name, incidentally, is Jean-Baptiste Clement – the rough English equivalent of John the Baptist, the Merciful.

Our culture has produced masters of dodging judgment. I heard on the Today Show not too long ago that Joe Halderman, the man accused of trying to extort two million dollars from Late Show host David Letterman, is pleading not guilty because he says his actions were no different than Tiger Woods paying off his mistresses to avoid embarrassment. The logic goes: if Woods wasn't facing criminal charges, why should he?

It's easy to avoid judgment when the story of our times is that we're basically good people who should not feel guilty about anything. But it turns out that sin is not graded on a curve because holiness is absolute value rather than relative one.

And so Isaiah, having come into the presence of this living God, becomes immediately aware that he is utterly lost: a man of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips. In short he holds the mirror up to himself and when illuminated by God's wholly otherness, he doesn't even see relative goodness in its reflection. He sees the distinction between himself and God. So much depends on this distinction – that God is God and we are not. When we lose that distinction, we think we have no reason to face judgment. And when we have no reason to face judgment, we have no hope of salvation.

Isaiah, being painfully made aware of this distinction tries to hide himself. And just when he thinks that all is lost an angel of the Lord brings a burning coal and purifies his unclean lips. “Now your guilt is gone, your sin is blotted out”. Through absolutely no action of his own... he is set free; assured of his forgiveness. And once he has worshipped, once he has confessed, once he has received the assurance of his pardon – then Isaiah hears the voice of God: “Whom shall I send?”

This vision of Isaiah reveals two conditions for our lives as Christians. Our lives must first be purified by fire. Then we can hear the Voice of God. And once we can hear the voice of God, we can be sent by God. None of us can speak for God by our own strength; and none of us can save ourselves. Only the power of God's Holiness, having touched our lives, can bring us into God's presence. Our sin must be burned away, must be annihilated. It is painful to face judgment but it's the only way.

And that's good news because there's grace on the other side. Because God has decided that his holiness is not a limitation. God's holiness is not a prison in which he has hidden himself away from us. He is able to act on behalf of those whose mere existence has disqualified them. Though our darkness hides us from God's presence, God is able to pierce the darkness and use people of unclean lips. God is able to use even people like us. The good news is, people like us is all there ever have been.

We see it again in this morning's New Testament lesson. Jesus, having produced a miraculous abundance of fish, scares the living hell out of Peter. He, like Isaiah becomes aware of the distinction between himself and the one in whose presence he has come. So he hides his face: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” While there is no flaming coal, there is the calm and steady voice, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be fishers of men.”

Peter, becoming aware of the difference between himself and God bows in worship at God's feet. God, having come in the presence of sin, burns the sin away and says: "now you are ready. Now I can use you."

If I had to answer my friend again, who asked me if I was bored during worship, I might say to her: "Bored? How could I ever be bored? Worship brings me to an awareness of the only distinction that makes sense. God is God and I am not. It's terrifying – but it's also joyful. Because it is there that I hear that despite the fact that I'm so far away from God, God chooses to bring me close to him. God chooses to burn away my imperfections and God chooses to use even someone like me. How could that be boring?"

Friends. God is near. God is refining you. God will use you. Let him.

Almighty God, we wonder what we are doing when we call on you. We wonder about that because you make it perfectly clear in scripture that you will totally disrupt our lives. Peter was just trying to eke out a living catching fish. You told Isaiah to deliver a message to his people that they were never going to accept. And now you are calling *us*? Don't you know what kind of people we are? Of course you do, but you also see the kind of people we can become if we allow you to purify our hearts and clean our lips. Make us desperate to long for you. And then use us. Strengthen us to be your people. And give us the boldness to pray as you taught us.