

Called to Love

Isaiah 6:1-8
John 3:1-17

Crossroads Christian Church
May 31, 2015 Pentecost 1B

Think of a moment when awe and wonder and mystery were so real to you that maybe you could reach out and touch it. Maybe it was when you saw a new life come into the world, like the birth of a child. Maybe it was in a place of great natural beauty. Maybe a thunderstorm was filling the sky and lightning flashing all around. One of my memories came at Montreat, North Carolina, a large Presbyterian conference center at a planning meeting for a national ecumenical youth event. The night before, after we arrived, we were standing on a large open porch, watching it rain. But when we looked up, we could see snow falling above the rain. A warm pocket of air in the valley was melting the snow when it came to our altitude. The next morning I had some free time, so I decided to hike up into the Appalachian hills above the conference center. It was a steep trail, with many lovely views of the valley. Sure enough, I didn't get too far up the trail before I was walking in snow, underneath a clear crisp blue sky. But the moment of awe came even farther up, as I walked through a grove of blooming rhododendrons near the top of the hillside. At that altitude, the rhododendrons were glazed with a quarter inch of clear ice, shining brilliantly in the sunlight. In the early Spring quiet, you could tap a leaf, and hear the tiny tinkling sound of the ice falling to the ground. The beauty took my breath away. I thanked God for having led me there.

Each of our scriptures today fill us with that sense of wonder, that sense of awe at the goodness of God; the majesty of God; the beauty of God; the power of God; the love of God.

I usually don't throw fancy theological words out at you in a sermon, but today I'm going to. The word is theophany. It means, literally, an appearance of God. God shines through into our normal workaday world, and we know without a doubt that we're in God's presence. We know w/o a doubt that things will never be the same again.

That's what Isaiah experienced in the temple, the year that King Uzziah died. Isaiah was a young aristocrat, one of the ruling class, and maybe he had gone to the temple to reflect on what changes God might bring to their nation. The temple was a great dark place, with smoke from burnt offerings and oil lamps adding to the sense of mystery. In this space, but not completely in it, Isaiah, a young aristocrat of Jerusalem, was amazed to experience a theophany—God was there, in his awesome presence. "I saw the Lord!" the young man said. But the only visual description of God is of a corner of his robe.

Maybe out of fear and respect, he averted his eyes. Around the Lord were angels—seraphim, to be exact. In fact, the angels veiled their own faces in the presence of God, as they flew about singing, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of heavenly forces! All the earth is filled with God’s glory!” And synagogue and church have sung that song, in many different forms, ever since—Holy, Holy, Holy.

The young man felt doomed! Hadn’t God told Moses that no one sees God’s face and lives? Isn’t God’s purity and goodness so great that we in all our sinfulness would stand condemned? But Isaiah isn’t killed. Isaiah isn’t condemned. He’s purified, made clean, and given an opportunity to respond to God’s invitation to carry God’s message.

People hearing Isaiah’s story would remember a similar theophany—there’s that word again—when Moses went up to Mount Sinai. Moses must have felt the same—abject fear, but also total awe and wonder as the light and smoke swirled about, and God gifted the people with the law.

Another passage of theophany, comparable to Isaiah’s vision, is found in Psalm 29. You, divine beings! Give to the Lord—

give to the Lord glory and power!

Give to the Lord the glory due his name!

Bow down to the Lord in holy splendor!

The Lord’s voice is over the waters;

the glorious God thunders;

the Lord is over the mighty waters.

The Lord’s voice is strong;

the Lord’s voice is majestic.”

It goes describing all nature being overwhelmed with God storming by, and at verse 9, cries out.

.... The Lord’s voice convulses the oaks,
strips the forests bare,

but in his temple everyone shouts, “Glory!”

Glory! Holy, Holy Holy! What an awesome experience to know with every fiber of your being the power and majesty and love of God.

On the surface, the familiar story in John 3, of the Pharisee Nicodemus coming to meet Jesus at night, is much more low-key. There’s no smoke or flashing lights. There are no angels flying and chanting. There are no overwhelming special effects at all--just two men, talking in the night about things of the Spirit. Jesus offered Nicodemus the Spirit of God, a power of renewal in his life that could transform him. Jesus talked of the mystery of the Spirit, of God’s presence, moving wherever it wanted to, whenever it wanted to, and how it could give new life. Jesus talked about how the Son of Man had to be lifted up, like the bronze snake that Moses had lifted up in the wilderness to keep his people safe. Jesus being raised up would be the

sign of the world's salvation. Why? Because God so loved the world. That was a theophany too, because it changed the way that Nicodemus, and we, saw God at work as the evening winds blew.

Be aware that God's creativity, God's power, God's gift of life is all around us. Maybe this afternoon, some of you families can go spend some time outdoors and see the tiny miracles that you can find—the organization of a spider web; the tiny seed that bears within it the blueprints for a great tree. But you should also look around here, before you go, look at one another's faces, and see how God is reflected in the ordinary lives, in the ordinary faces, of people like us. See the weathered lines in the faces of those who have met pain and struggle, but moved on with grace and confidence. See the joy of a child's smile. See the love of a married couple. See the wisdom and inner strength of the old. See a covenant people who are daring to try to reproduce the life of Jesus in this place.

Open your eyes to the wonder of it all. Let yourselves be overwhelmed by God's glory in the world and in people around you. Sometimes we're too uncomfortable to let that happen. But we miss so much when we do that. Our souls shrivel when we don't see the creative hand of God at work in our midst. Elizabeth Barrett Browning said,

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
And only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.¹

See the burning bushes, and know the wonders of our God. Don't miss the beauty, the joy, the love that is in front of your faces, or that which is behind your faces (tap head).

As we realize the wonder of nature, of life, of God, it helps us realize that we should treasure and cherish creation, including ourselves and other people. We are each gifts of God to the world. That makes a difference in how carefully we treat the natural world; how carefully we treat each other. It makes a difference in the decisions we make, for example, about recycling, about the items we purchase, and how we relate to people.

Today is Trinity Sunday—we celebrate that God is one, yet we experience God in three ways. God is Creator and Father, but more than that. God is personal and loving, revealed ultimately in Jesus Christ, but more than that. God is with us, through us, and in us through the Spirit, but is more than that. Sometimes, when I teach children about the Trinity, they are surprised when I walk up to each one and drop a small cube of ice in their hands and asked them to hold onto it and watch it. "What do you have?" "Ice." "What else?" "Water." "What happens when that water is absorbed into the air?" "Water

vapor. Clouds. Steam.” “But it’s still water, right?” “Yeah.” “God is still God, too. No matter how we see God expressed.”

In a few minutes we will come to the Communion Table. As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we remember and we wonder—what wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul? as the song goes. And not only is God mindful of us, but God has invited us to dinner. At this dinner, as we break bread and drink wine, we remember our Host, the living Christ, who died and rose again to set us free. What wondrous love is this, O my soul? Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

ⁱ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, from “Aurora Leigh” quoted in *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* Number 86.