

Hillcrest Congregational UCC

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Who? Us?

Isaiah 6:1-13, Romans 8:12-25, John 3:1-17

This week instead of Ezekiel and dead bones being resurrected, we have Isaiah's dramatic vision. Imagine again the Disney version. God in all of God's majesty, is sitting on a throne in the temple, the throne is high and lofty and God is so awesome, large, so overwhelming that the hem of God's robe alone fills the whole temple. Accompanying this vision of God's majesty are seraphs, angels so who are so pure they burn with fire. They fly around using their wings not only to keep them aloft but to cover their eyes and their feet in a gestures of worship and humility, as though kneeling and praying. They sing a song to God and each other that is so loud, so powerful, the temple shakes, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory." And the house of the Lord filled with smoke.

This is the scene of God's call on Isaiah life to become God's prophet to the people. It certainly got his attention! He cries out "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" After the seraphs burn his lips clean, he signs up to be God's prophet.

You see, up until King Uzziah died, things were going fairly well. During his 41 years of rule, the country enjoyed power and prosperity and extended its borders. It controlled a lucrative trade route. For years, Uzziah and the people remained in relationship with God. They kept the covenant, their worship and their lives were acceptable to God, and they had peace.

But inevitably, the people take their relationship with God for granted. The vision Isaiah has of God is not of a domesticated, passive god but a mighty and awesome God worthy and expectant of obedience and commitment to covenant. God calls Isaiah to warn the people, to caution them, to call them to think about what they are doing and about to do, and ultimately to repentance, to turn around, to turn back to God, to get back on the right path.

But if you know anything about the story of the Israelites, if you know anything about and human nature of any people, we don't listen. And the prophecy God gives to Isaiah comes true- the people do not comprehend, they do not understand. Their minds become dull, they stop looking for and listening to God and eventually, their cities are laid waste, the people are exiled. Within a decade they were stripped of their land, became a vassal of Assyria and lost their religious independence. They had to accept Assyrian gods into the temple at Jerusalem. And the scripture says those who remained loyal to God were as a stump to a mighty cedar, where there was once an entire forest of trees.

Prophets like Isaiah called attention to the shallowness of the religion of the people. The people assumed that cultic activity could ensure God's favor, God's protection and continued material blessings. They accepted commonplace patterns of social injustice, inequities of wealth and corruption. Isaiah was called to guide the people through a crisis that, because they would not listen, lasted 50 years.

And here we are today in the same place in our country, our state, our conference, our church. The prophecy of Isaiah, the warning, the caution, the call to repentance is as valid today as when it was first spoken, as when it was first written on parchment, as when it was added to the Hebrew scriptures, and then to the Christian Bible. Our God cannot be domesticated. Not into God of the United States, a capitalist God, a God of the religious right, or a God of the

United Church of Christ, or the remnant here at Hillcrest church. The holy God brings us up short, jars us into self-recognition and beckons us to a radical reorientation of our individual, social, political, and religious priorities. Without this listening, without repentance, without change, we experience our own self-imposed exile from God as well.

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus calls for change right in the beginning of his ministry by turning the tables in the temple. His action was a dramatic, in your face, this has got to stop, call to radical repentance. Of all the places that he saw injustice and abuse of the people, of all the places where people were not welcomed and treated with dignity, he said, I draw the line here. Not here in this holy place. Not here in God's temple. Not here in my Father's house.

And Jesus' call to be born from above or born anew in the scripture is not a namby pamby nicety, nor is it a call for individual salvation through an emotional conversion experience. Yes, being born from above or anew can mean exiting the condition of worldly existence and entering the realm of God's grace. Yes the Christian who is born from above, anew or again in Christ realizes they are a child of God, experiences an intimacy with God, and has the spirit of Christ dwelling in him. Yes, the old self dies away, with its worldly desires and false views. Yes, being reborn means we experience the gifts of the Spirit. But that is only a part of it. When Jesus calls for being born anew he is calling for a radical change in individuals who go on to make radical changes in the religious, political and social priorities, who go on to change the world, who go on to build the Beloved community of God- heaven on earth.

And how do I know that? Because I looked at this whole conversation Jesus has with Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes in the night to Jesus. Nicodemus is a leader of the temple- he is a representative of all that Jesus has just railed against. Nicodemus cannot be seen with the likes of this radical who has just turned the tables in the temple. Yet Nicodemus is confused by what is happening. He believes one way- that Jesus cannot be right, Jesus cannot be the one –the Messiah. And yet Jesus does the signs that prove that he is.

The author of John uses Nicodemus as a powerful image. Although he first comes to Jesus at night as a symbol of his lack of understanding- Nicodemus is featured twice more in daylight—and understanding—to defend Jesus at his trial (7:50-51) and to prepare Jesus' body for burial (19:39). In the end his is a story of a person whose faith gradually dawned on him.

Far from being the instantaneous conversion, a singular "born again" experience, Nicodemus come to faith eventually, walking with Jesus and not abandoning him even at the most dangerous times. Nicodemus does not profess a sudden faith in Jesus and then go back to his life. He walks with Jesus, learning from him and putting what he has learned into action.

Interestingly, Hinduism and Buddhism, religions that existed many hundreds of years before Jesus spoke with Nicodemus both have the concept of being born again. A person who has received religious instruction, realized and grounded their life in the truths, is twice born. They are initiated into the mysteries of new knowledge by an able teacher and the old ways of looking at life are replaced as the twice born make vows to follow the path. There is a mystic transformation of rebirth that is integral to salvation.¹

When I combine this information with the knowledge of the Gospel according to John as a Gnostic document, this creates for me a scene of Nicodemus meeting the able teacher who is able to initiate him into the mysteries. A mystic transformation is about to take place.

But what I note most especially is that Jesus did not lull Nicodemus into submission. This was no gradual wearing down of his resistance. Jesus told Nicodemus right up front what being born anew, being born of water and the spirit means. Jesus tells him that the wind blows

¹ <http://origin.org/ucs/ws/theme077.cfm> World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology

where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Once you are born of the spirit, if you are truly born anew, the spirit will take over your life and you will not even want to resist it. And, Jesus tells him, even to death the spirit will lead, so that people will believe in what I say, that they will know that God loves them. So that they might embrace the eternal life God offers and the world might be saved.

In our own lives, our faith and the gifts of the spirit may also take time, gradually bringing us from fear to faith and from timid acceptance to bold witness.² But that is what we are called to. Last Sunday there was a horrible murder in a church. A was murdered because of his beliefs, which he put in to action to help others. The church put out this statement:

The Reformation Lutheran Church family is shocked and deeply saddened by the violent murder of Dr. George Tiller, a longtime member of our congregation, that occurred in our church home. Our congregation strives to be a safe place for all people. We deplore the violence that took place within the walls of our church.

They go further to witness to their beliefs: "...we reject any notion that violence against another human being is an acceptable way to resolve differences over any issue. We must always strive to engage in peaceful discussion. Our faith calls us to this. Our humanity demands it.

And there is comfort and good news for the church, and for us, "In this time of uncertainty, we stand firm in the promises of Jesus Christ: forgiveness, hope, love, and new life, even from death." All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs of God. And glory is about to be revealed to us.

But there is also the challenge of being filled with the spirit. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. What is it we here are called to witness to? Where will the spirit take us?

² UCC weekly seeks Mark Suriano, Mysterious Encounter