

Sunday November 13, 2016
Isaiah 6:1-8

I begin this morning with a well known and often used quote from Annie Dillard's book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

"On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of 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 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 someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

Well, buckle up folks. This may be a bumpy ride. Because to turn our hearts and minds to the divine mystery among us this morning may mean that we hear things we don't want to hear, and call us to say things we don't want to say.

The waking god may show us, like the prophet Isaiah, that when we stand in the presence of the living God among us, we may be drawn to a place where we can never return.

Our biblical readings this fall have focused on life in the Northern Kingdom, the northern part of Israel that was created as the result of the breakup of the kingdom of Israel. Isaiah is set in the Southern Kingdom. It takes place around the last years of the Northern Kingdom, during the 740s, just before the Northern Kingdom falls to Assyria. King Uzziah was the king at this time, and during his reign Judah was prosperous. It was at the time of the king's death that we encounter the young prophet Isaiah and his awesome encounter with God. ...

... Isaiah, who is a priest, is at the temple worshipping and has a vision. ... God is sitting on a very big throne, because Isaiah can only see the hem of his robe. There are two kinds of creatures, normally considered angels, buzzing around the throne praising God. The seraphs have six wings and four of them are covering parts of their bodies; two cover their eyes and two cover their midsections. They are flying around

praising God saying “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of heavenly forces! All the earth is filled with God’s glory!”¹

And Isaiah, in his fear, and without a crash helmet, is in such awe and so terrified, and probably thinks he is about to die, proclaims himself unworthy of this encounter. Some commentators suggest that perhaps he is feeling guilty for not calling out the king for a lot of wrongdoing during his reign. Then one of the angels comes and touches a hot coal to his lips. Well that would wake you up out of your reverie! Perhaps it’s symbol of purification. Then God says “whom shall I send and who will go for us?”, and Isaiah answers “Here I am. Send me.”

Well, that’s a great story if it ended there. We are to go where God sends us. But there is a twist in the next few verses. Verses that we didn’t hear read, that weren’t in the reading today. This is what verses 9-13 say:

And God said, “Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’”¹⁰ Make the mind of this people dull,

and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.”¹¹ Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; ¹²until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.”

Well, do you think Isaiah might have re-thought things at that point? “Yeah ... no, don’t think I’m up for that God. I’m not your man.”

He is being instructed to preach to the people in a way that they won’t understand, until the place is destroyed. What in the world is that about?

Perhaps, God is saying to Isaiah that no matter what he says, the people won’t understand. But that is not to stop him from telling the truth. And maybe, God is saying that things are going to get a lot worse before they get better. But that is not to stop him from telling the truth. And, it didn’t. The prophet Isaiah spoke the truth to power in the Southern Kingdom for decades after his encounter with God.

¹ file:///C:/Users/Surface/Downloads/storyofgod111316%20%20(4).pdf

It's been quite a week. Many of us probably felt we needed crash helmets on Wednesday morning. I, like many others, was in complete shock and disbelief Wednesday morning after the US election. This despite my knowledge of award winning filmmaker and journalist Michael Moore's well-articulated prediction back in July about "5 Reasons why Trump will win." But I don't understand American politics all that well, and I was still in a bubble believing that this wouldn't happen. It's a prophetic and well written piece, and I would urge those of you who want to follow up to look it up and read the whole thing.²

And so since Wednesday I have been reading, and reading, and reading more ... analyses and rants and facebook posts, and editorials, all with pieces of the puzzle. And I get squirmier and squirmier as the writings point to my own naivete and complicity within a corrupt system.

And then this came across my facebook from a friend from the Aboriginal community out west. It says:

"Things are not getting worse. They are getting

uncovered. We must continue to hold each other and pull back the veil."³

For many whose identity lies within racialized and mariginalized communities, this is not a surprise. It's another hit in a long line of atrocities and oppressive structures that many in our society have been subjected to for generations.

So I am finding that what I need to do most is to listen. And maybe even take my crash helmet off, because that probably impedes my hearing a bit. Clearly, I have a lot more learning to do.

Public Broadcaster Bill Moyers shared a quote on his social media page this week ...

"America didn't die. It's having a reality check. The trickster came to town and upended the banquet table. He held up a mirror to what was hidden. Now we must own it — all of it. The country built on native genocide, racism and misogyny is getting a painfully good look at who we are. We now have an opportunity to change that." - Elizabeth Paxson⁴

In 2005 I went to a university chaplains' conference at Columbia University in New York City.

² <http://michaelmoore.com/trumpwillwin/>

³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMhQhJ3gwdv/>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=bill%20moyers>

While there, Pat and I had a chance to see some of the city. Very close to Columbia is a well known Episcopal church called St. John the Divine. They are known for their art exhibits and music concerts in the beautiful sanctuary. They actually had listed on staff a Minister of the Arts. How cool is that?

When we were there, part of the building was under reconstruction due to a recent fire, but they still hosted several art exhibitions, as well as a number of permanent installations all around the sides and alcoves in the sanctuary. One of the exhibits was a new exhibit called Americans Who Tell the Truth – Models of Courageous Citizenship, by painter Robert Shetterly. The 180 portraits and narratives highlight citizens who courageously address issues of social, environmental, and economic fairness.

The exhibit has been traveling around the country since 2003. Venues have included everything from university museums and grade school libraries to sandwich shops, and the Superior Court in San Francisco. To date, the exhibits have visited 26 states. In 2006, a book of the portraits based on the exhibits

won the top award of the International Reading Association for Intermediate non-fiction.

The portraits have given Shetterly an opportunity to speak with children and adults all over this country about the necessity of dissent in a democracy, the obligations of citizenship, sustainability, US history, and how democracy cannot function if politicians don't tell the truth, if the media don't report it, and if the people don't demand it.

I would encourage you to look the exhibit up online – it's an incredible collection of paintings, each with a quote and biography – Harriet Tubman, Walt Whitman, Naomi Kline, Susan B. Anthony, Abraham Lincoln, Mohammed Ali, Rachel Carson, Mother Jones, Sojourner Truth, Edward Snowden, Alice Walker, Lily Yeh ... many you would know, but many you probably have never heard before. Shetterly himself says that out of the 180 portraits, half of them were people who he had never heard of before. The home page of the exhibit is here:

<http://www.americanswhotellthetruth.org/traveling-exhibit>

I am going to let him describe the project to you, why he began the project, and how it inspired the children and youth in the city of Greensboro, NC, a year ago.

(See video:

<http://www.americanswhotellthetruth.org/news/greensboro-nc-students-contribute-to-and-learn-from-the-awtt-exhibit>)

“Things are not getting worse. They are getting uncovered. We must continue to hold each other and pull back the veil.”

Our call at this time, is to stand with those who are afraid and to continue to have faith in an alternative vision of how the world should be. Jesus demanded no less of us. There are lots of articles and commentaries this week about how to be an ally, how to listen, and how to stand with those on the margins.

May we have the courage to speak even though our lips may be burned. May we have the courage to speak even though we may not be understood, even though things might get worse. Put your crash helmets on, for we stand before a God that demands that we

wake up to the realities around us. Whom will I send?
Here I am. Send me. We will not go alone.

Thanks be to God.