

Date: February 8, 2004

SUNDAY: Ordinary 5

SERMON: The Transforming Encounter

Text(s): Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

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The story is told that President Teddy Roosevelt and his close friend, the renowned naturalist Charles William Beebe, used to spend many summer evenings out on the lawn of Teddy Roosevelt's home at Sagamore Hill, Long Island, gazing at the stars through a telescope. Since both of them were keen amateur astronomers, they would take delight in repeating the facts they knew, such as the fact that our galaxy is only one of more than 100 million galaxies, and that our sun is only a minor star in a solar system that is one of millions in our galaxy alone. Or they might observe a faint dot of light in the sky and remind each other that that particular star was 750,000 light years from the earth.

At the conclusion of their evenings, Teddy Roosevelt would invariably say, "Well, I think we're small enough now. Let's go to bed."

That feeling of smallness and awe in the face of profound mystery, vast space, or enormous power is one that is common to all of us. I remember feeling very small the summer of 1991, when we were vacationing on Nantucket Island and Hurricane Bob paid us an unexpected visit. Sitting in a cottage on a small hill for nearly eight hours watching trees bent over at right angles and listening to the howl and roar of 110 mph winds was sufficient to make me realize that I was probably not quite the center of the universe.

Both the aristocratic courtier Isaiah and the rugged fisherman Simon Peter had a similar awe-inspiring encounter that made them feel very small, though the circumstances were quite different.

Isaiah, who had been an advisor to King Uzziah, was probably wondering what his future would be in the wake of King Uzziah's death. It's unlikely that the next king would keep the same advisors as his predecessor. Most kings (or

presidents) insist on their own team. So Isaiah was in the temple at worship, quietly ruminating about these matters, when he had his vision of God. *I saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance, and one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." And the foundations of the pillars shook at the voices of those who called and the house was full of smoke.*

A very graphic description, isn't it? A key element in understanding this vision of Isaiah is the designation of God as holy. The root meaning of holiness is separateness. That which is holy is separate from or other than that which is profane or which belongs to the ordinary things of life. It is this total "otherness" of God which inspires such awe on the part of Isaiah. Rudolph Otto has classically described the feelings of awe and smallness and inadequacy or even sinfulness which accompany such an experience of this holy otherness as the "*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*," a mystery that both terrifies and attracts at the same time.

Remember that scene at the end of the original Indiana Jones movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, where the false high priest opens the Ark of the Covenant and stares into the awful beauty of the *shekinah*, the radiant glory of God? His face takes on a look of both horror and desire as he exclaims "It's beautiful!" just before the flesh of his face melts like dripping candlewax and only his skull is left.

Hollywood special effects aside, that's hardly the experience we expect to have in church, is it? I daresay Isaiah didn't expect it either. In fact, worship services, liturgies, and religious rituals are, almost by definition, designed expressly to manage what could otherwise be a destructive encounter with Something or Someone whose unmediated presence would utterly consume us.

The story is told of an old rabbi in Eastern Europe who used to go to the synagogue every morning for the morning prayers. Before he left the house, he would gather his family around and

weep as he embraced and kissed them, as though he were never going to see them again. When one of his children asked why he was crying over a simple goodbye before he went off to pray, he replied, "Because I am going to pray to the living God, and who knows whether I will ever come back alive?"

That may be carrying the notion of God's holiness and awesomeness a bit too far, but it also points out that much of what passes for worship in most churches today has little of that sense of holy awe in it. Worship has become a consumer product, judged by its market appeal and entertainment value rather than by how it fosters a vision of the living God that at once consumes our arrogance and liberates our true humanity.

In C. S. Lewis's children's story *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the children who find themselves in the mysterious world called Narnia, which they have accidentally entered through the back of an old wardrobe, are being told by one of the inhabitants of Narnia about the true ruler of this land, the great lion Aslan, whose return has been rumored, and appears to be joyfully anticipated. The children are a bit uneasy about the notion of meeting up with a lion, and one of them asks, "But is he safe?"

"Oh no," the reply comes back, "he is most certainly not safe, but he is good."

True worship acknowledges that God alone is good, and reminds us that we are not. And in the encounter between holiness and profanity, there is no safety. There is, however, the inescapable possibility of transformation. That's what Isaiah experienced in his encounter with the living God in the temple. Isaiah was aware, not only of his own smallness in the face of enormous mystery and power, but also an awareness that he was, in some very real sense, too untruthful, too false, too unworthy to stand before such an unmanageable, non-negotiable goodness. In his terror he cries out, "*Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the*

midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." To his utter surprise, however, Isaiah is not consumed, but affirmed, and purified, and called to a mission. Through his lips, his unclean, but now purified lips, he will become God's truth-teller to the nation.

Peter's encounter with the Holy did not come in a worship service, but in the midst of the grind of daily work. Yet Peter's response and the end result are similar to that of Isaiah. He and James and John had worked all night trying to catch fish, but the fish were somewhere else that night, and now they were back on shore, tending to their nets, cleaning, repairing them, and getting them ready for the next night's fishing before going home to get some rest. Along comes this wandering rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, who's become something of a local celebrity, certainly enough so to attract a crowd of listeners. He says to Peter, "*Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.*" Luke simply reports that Peter said, "*Master, we have worked all night long and have caught nothing, yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets.*" In the telling, Peter's response sounds so calm, so uneventful, so cooperative. But can't you imagine Peter's feelings behind Luke's rather flat narrative? Put yourself in Peter's position. You're exhausted from working all night, hauling wet nets up into the boat, you're frustrated because all your work has brought you nothing. Then this itinerant rabbi shows up and without so much as a by-your-leave, invites himself onto your boat and tells you to go back out into deep water and have another try at catching something! If it were you, would you be feeling calm and cooperative? If it were me, I'd probably be struggling with the temptation to throw the rabbi overboard instead of the nets.

Imagine, then, Peter's chagrin when the catch of fish is so great it begins to swamp the boat, and it takes both crews in both boats struggling for all they're worth to bring the

bulging nets to shore. I can imagine that there were probably a few deleted expletives that leaped to Peter's mind, if not his tongue.

But expletives or not, Peter's reaction is similar to that of Isaiah in the temple. As soon as they get safely back ashore, he runs and prostrates himself at Jesus' feet and says, "*Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.*" And, like Isaiah, instead of being consumed by his encounter with what he recognizes is the very presence and power of the living God, instead he hears these gracious words, "*Don't be afraid. Come follow me, and soon you'll be catching people instead of fish.*" Just those few words, but for Peter, they represented a whole new life. Instead of condemnation or rebuke, he is affirmed and called to journey with Jesus on his mission, no longer catching fish of the scaly, finny variety, but catching other sinners like himself in the Gospel net.

From both of these stories we learn that to acknowledge that we are not gods, but rather frail and sinful human beings may be a blow to our pride, but it is the beginning of our salvation. I'm not advocating that we have low self-esteem or think of ourselves as worthless. If God has created us, how can we be worthless? I am speaking, not of a proper self-esteem, but an improper confidence in our own competence and righteousness, an assertion of our own will to power, our own will to control— that attitude that the ancient Greeks named *hubris*. We see it all around us. In one of its more blatant forms, perhaps, we see it in Pete Rose's so-called confession that he bet on the Cincinnati Reds while he was managing them. "I'm sure that I'm supposed to act all sorry or sad or guilty," Rose said, "but I'm just not built that way. . . I'm sorry it happened. . . Now let's move on." Hardly the response of Isaiah or Peter, is it? A little of Isaiah's or Peter's acknowledgement of their fallibility and human frailty would serve Pete a lot better than the arrogance, the *hubris*, that comes through.

But *hubris* has a much more destructive effect than whether or not Pete Rose makes it to the Hall of Fame. What war in the whole history of humankind has not been the result of *hubris*? War is always spawned from the arrogance and need to dominate. Would we have any of the corporate scandals like Enron or Putnam were it not for *hubris*? I don't need to go on. It's all too obvious; we live in the nest that we ourselves have fowled every day.

What has the power to save us, to rescue us from ourselves is the ability to see ourselves truly as fallible creatures, as people who are often weak, petty-minded, controlling, fearful, selfish, and ethically-challenged. And as both of our stories this morning affirm, that clarity of vision, that truthfulness about ourselves is the inevitable product of an encounter with the One who is Wholly Other, the one whose glory and goodness shines with such power that nothing false in us can abide its presence.

Yet such truthfulness and clarity about ourselves, far from destroying us, actually sets us free and equips us to become who we were created to be. It sets us free to become partners with God in repairing the world.

Both Isaiah and Peter are called— they discover a new vocation that changes their lives and sets them on a different road and engages them in God's own work of redemption.

Isaiah no longer will be the favored court advisor telling the king what he wants to hear; he will speak God's truth to the king and that truthful word will shake the very foundations of the kingdom. He will speak words of judgment and grace to a nation that was going badly astray, losing its way in entangling and disastrous political alliances while neglecting to care for the poor or to establish justice. Isaiah recognized that his new vocation was a call to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Peter's call, on the other hand, was simply a call to follow Jesus, and in the following, to learn how to apply his old skills at fishing in a

new context and with a new purpose in service to a new master. And when he accepted that new vocation, that calling to follow Jesus, this Galilean fisherman, rough-edged and unrefined as he undoubtedly was, became the man to whom Jesus later said, *“You are a rock, and upon this rock, I will build my church.”*

I suggest that it has always been that way, because that’s the way God created us. We only find our life’s meaning and purpose when we have opened ourselves to that encounter with the God who made us, and when, in that moment of encounter, we understand both our own deep creatureliness, our own moral inadequacy, and the amazing grace that accepts us anyway and empowers us to become and to do whatever God calls us to do.

Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary General of the United Nations back in the 1960’s, who was also a man of deep faith, wrote in his journal *Markings*, about his own encounter and call. *“I don’t know who or what put the question. I don’t even remember when it was put. But at some point, I said ‘Yes’ to Someone, or Something, and from that point on, my life, in self-surrender, has had a meaning and a goal.”*

I don’t know, and cannot predict, how or where your own transforming encounter with God may occur— in church like Isaiah’s or in the midst of your daily work like Peter’s. I only know that if you are open to it, seeking it, it will. Neither do I know where your discovery of your vocation—your calling— in that encounter will take you. That it will take you to places and people you never expected or anticipated, and will lead you to undertake things you never imagined you would undertake, I am certain. You will hear, as Isaiah, as millions of God’s people before you have heard, a voice saying, *“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”* And in that moment of awful clarity and truth, you will hear your own voice and heart responding, *“Here am I, send me.”*