

Wow! Woe! Yes!
by Rev. Susan Morrison
5th Sunday after the Epiphany
February 4, 2007

Isaiah 6:1-13

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw God sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of God's robe filled the temple. ² above, Seraphs were in attendance; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the God of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory." ⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

⁵ And I said: "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 Yahweh, the only true God!" ⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." ⁸ Then I heard the voice of God saying, "Whom shall I send? and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." ⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" ⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." ¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

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This morning's lessons seem particularly appropriate for a Communion Sunday. On the first Sunday of the month, it is our tradition to feast on the bread of life and drink from the cup of salvation and, we do so, we come with the hope and expectation of meeting or encountering or experiencing the grace of Jesus Christ. It is just such an encounter with God that is described in both lessons from Isaiah and Luke where the stories of Isaiah and Peter are recounted.

In the first lesson we meet Isaiah, a man who is probably only moderately religious. It isn't that he doesn't believe in God – that's not the issue. Of course he does. He is a good Jew trying to keep the laws and the commandments. But let's say that he doesn't let his religion consume his whole life. Isaiah knows that dropping by the Temple on the way to the office won't hurt him. In fact, it might even save him from temptation. So, with his briefcase in one hand and a bagel with cream cheese in the other, he rushes in for a quick prayer to get his day started off right.

What happens is not what Isaiah expected! The routine of his day is interrupted when to his amazement he sees a remarkable vision. He looks up to the altar, and sees, of all things, Almighty God, vested in outrageous and magnificent robes, sitting on a throne with heavenly winged hosts swooping to and fro, singing and calling to one another “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

WOW! And then immediately, WOE! Right away Isaiah knows he is in trouble. Suddenly, in the presence of God, he recognizes his own unworthiness. “Woe is me. I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips” exclaims Isaiah. Isaiah is bewildered. But I wonder, is his response guilt or is it awe? Is it really unworthiness or is it humility? Is Isaiah shying away from his own inadequacy, or is he shuddering with sheer awe in the midst of God’s glory?

But God will have none of Isaiah’s whining. “If sinfulness is what you’re worried about, Isaiah, watch this” says God as one of the flying holy creatures takes a live coal from the altar, swoops down to where Isaiah is standing and touches his lips with it. “Now that this coal has touched your lips” speaks the heavenly being, “your guilt is gone and your sin is forgiven.”

The grace of God has spilled out upon Isaiah. It is a moment of epiphany that leaves him whole and able. And now it’s God’s turn to speak. God takes a chance on Isaiah. “Whom shall I send? Who will go out into the world and speak the truth and transform the people?” And Isaiah, knowing it’s crazy, knowing it’s radical, knowing it means risking everything says “YES. Send me.”

In the second lesson we meet Simon Peter, who is also probably only nominally religious. After all, he’s a fisherman and his primary concern is whether there will be fish to catch. No fish? No bread on the table. But then there’s been this man Jesus hanging around – preaching, teaching, engaging the curiosity of even fishermen, like Peter. And on this particular day, Jesus asks Peter if he can preach from his boat. “Why not?” reasons Peter. “I haven’t caught any fish. Why not use the boat for a good purpose.”

And so, while Jesus teaches the people on the shore, Peter and his friends stand by in their boats. They listen and wait. As Jesus finishes, Peter assumes he should row Jesus back to shore. But instead, Jesus charges Peter to fish some more. “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch” instructs Jesus. Filled with doubt and cynicism, Peter reluctantly obeys. After all, an all night fishing expedition had netted not a single fish.

And then WOW! The fishing nets are suddenly overflowing with a catch. In this epiphany moment, Peter recognizes the power of God incarnated in this preacher, teacher Jesus. He realizes that he is in the presence of God. WOW! And then WOE! he immediately recognizes his own unworthiness and is bewildered.

“Get out of my boat, Jesus. Go away. I am a sinful man” Peter pleads. I wonder. Is his response guilt or is it awe? Is it really unworthiness or is it humility? Is Peter shying away from his own inadequacy, or is he shuddering with sheer awe in the midst of God’s glory?

Jesus hears. Jesus understands. And Jesus takes a chance on Peter. “Peter. Fear not. I bring you Good News. Whom shall I send? Who will go into the world to catch and transform the people?”

And Peter, knowing it’s crazy, knowing it’s radical, knowing it means risking everything says “YES, I will follow you.”

Isaiah and Peter. You and I. It could be anyone of us who has an epiphany moment, sensing the awesome presence of God and hearing the call to something bold and new. Wow! Woe! and Yes! can happen anytime, in any place, in the most surprising ways. It might be at the communion rail. It might be in a dream. It might be during a time of prayer. It might be an encounter with God’s Word or with another of Jesus’ followers. God comes to us again and again and again.

It’s significant to note that both Isaiah and Peter’s call came in mid life. Isaiah is settled, solid and safe. Peter

has spent years honing his skills, building his muscles, learning the rhythms of the sea. But God isn't finished with them yet, just as God is not finished with us yet, either! When they least expected it and maybe when we least want it, God breaks through with a wake up call.

Joyce Rupp in her book, *Dear Heart, Come Home* relates a dream that she experienced as a sort of mid life wake up call. She writes:

At a point in mid-life when I was facing the option of choosing some new theories and untried behavior, I dreamed that I was in a social situation where there was a large table of food. This table stretched across the entire room. It held a bounty of colorful, peculiar-looking, unknown foods. I stood among all the strangers who were in the room ignoring me and I wondered what food I might choose at the table that would be 'safe.' The only thing there that I recognized was egg salad, so I put a large helping of this on my plate and walked away from the table.

When I woke up, I laughed. There are few foods that I dislike, but egg salad is one of them. Yet, in my dream, I chose the egg salad, which was a 'safe' food because I knew it. How loudly this spoke to my fear of insecurity and of risking some new nourishment for myself. I resolved that day to let go of my 'egg salad' approach to life. (Joyce Rupp, *Dear Heart, Come Home*, p. 107)

My friends, how much are we wedded to an egg salad kind of living? sticking to that which is safe and familiar and predictable? nourishing ourselves with that which no longer satisfies? How much are we protecting ourselves from God's awe? God's mystery? God's call to new and bold living?

Perhaps, if we're open to God's call to us, if we pay attention to the signs, we, too, might experience transformation. It might mean a simple minor adjustment to our lives, or a short term revision – a clarification of direction that we've been needing. Or it might mean a bold change, a leaving behind a lifestyle or an addiction or a hurtful behavior or misplaced value and radically altering the living of our days.

Beyond the personal scope, how do these scriptures address our own future as the body of Christ here at Holy Trinity? I wonder how all of your thoughts and suggestions and opinions that many of you have shared at the *Have Your Say* small group meetings will become our vision, our goals for the next few years? Did you recognize God's spirit in the midst of those gatherings? Did you feel the living presence of Jesus Christ speaking through you or others in the group? Did you hear the Spirit asking "Whom shall I send to accomplish this needed ministry? Who will go forth and be my ambassadors of love?"

Hopefully, our vision and our strategic plan will be our response as we say "YES, God, send us!"

One thing is for certain and that is that God isn't finished with us yet. God is always ready to take another chance on each of us and on us as the church.

So let's open our eyes! Let's open our ears! Let's open our hearts! So that we will hear God calling each of us by name, claiming us, cleansing us, and sending us.

And then, let us be willing to surrender to the Holy, to find the trust and the hope and the courage to say "Yes, here I am, Lord. Send me."

May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia. Amen.