

Year C, 5 Epiphany

February 10, 2019

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

Have you ever walked through our church... maybe any church... alone... after dark? Now you would think that if you were going to feel safe anywhere, it would be alone in a church. Right? Just me and God who loves me? Could you be any safer?

This is kind of a creepy place at night when the lights are out. The building creaks... the trees cast strange shadows through the windows. Your mind starts going places you don't want it to go... there's plenty of places for someone to hide... And then I read Isaiah's call story – our Old Testament reading from this morning – and try to imagine what his experience must have been like. Isaiah and God, literally alone in a holy place. And then we read about the seraphim. The seraphim – legend says they are fiery, 6-winged, flying serpents – and they're calling to one another. And God is, apparently, huge – massive. The hem of his robe fills the temple!<sup>1</sup> That reading from this morning never fails to give me chills.

There, in the midst of the temple, Isaiah stands before God... vulnerable... defenseless... probably feeling naked. And all Isaiah can say is, “woe is me! I'm a sinner, and I'm standing before God. I'm doomed!”

Standing before God, Isaiah only sees his sins, but that's not how God sees Isaiah. There is no doom here for sinful Isaiah. God literally wipes away Isaiah's sin – purifying Isaiah's lips with a hot coal – and then God tells Isaiah, “let's get to work.” From what I've recently observed about human nature, if you or I were God in this case, sinful Isaiah wouldn't have

---

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 6:1-2

stood a chance. As God, we would have crushed that sinful man with our judgmental, divine thumb. But that's not God's way.

God sees beyond our sinful humanity. God disregards our past and judges us based on who we are today. God doesn't see our weaknesses. God doesn't hold our past lack of judgement against us. God doesn't count every stupid, idiotic thing we've ever done...and then tell us we're not fit for the Kingdom of God. No, God *uses* our past and all those things we'd like to forget. God uses our hurts and our sins and our woundedness and our regrets and our past misdeeds and our misspoken words and then, like a potter, God uses the ugly, dirty clay of our lives to shape and form us into beautiful creations...to shape us into who we are today. **We** have a difficult time getting over our own sins, and we relish the sins of others, don't we?

Don't look too deeply into my past, because you won't like what you see. I don't like what I see when I look into my own past, and sometimes, like Peter, I want to cry out, "go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Probably most of feel that way at some time – "Go away Lord! You see me as I truly am, and I don't think I like it." Have any of us *never* done something that makes us ashamed today. How would our own lives stand up to scrutiny? I need to tread very carefully when I scrutinize, and criticize, someone else's life.

When Peter realized he was standing in his little fishing boat with the Lord of All Creation, he fell to his knees and, like the prophet Isaiah, cried out, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

But when Jesus looked at Peter, he didn't see a sinful man. Jesus saw promise, and hope. He saw the good that Peter could do... would do, because Jesus doesn't dwell on our past. He doesn't see our weaknesses. He doesn't hold our past lack of judgement against us. That doesn't mean we're not responsible for our past actions.

There is an old German proverb, “If God were not willing to forgive sin, heaven would be empty.” How true. Isaiah recognized who he was...a sinner. Peter recognized who he was...a sinner. But that didn’t define them. And our past doesn’t have to define us. What does define us is whether we’ve owned up to what we’ve done, whether we’ve tried to make amends for our past, whether we’ve tried to heal wounds and divisions we’ve caused. What does define us is whether, with honesty and humility, we’ve asked for forgiveness when our actions hurt others. What does define us is whether we are reconciled with God.

On Ash Wednesday, coming sooner than we realize, we pray some difficult words and I think we should all pray them together this morning...and then maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea if we prayed this every morning for the rest of our lives. Please turn to page 264 in the Prayer Book. Let us pray together: Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

AMEN

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam