

“Out of our comfort zone”

June 7, 2009

Text: Isaiah 6:1-8, John 3:1-12

I.

When we go church hunting—looking for a church home—most of us are seeking a church where we experience a certain comfort level? Isn't that the case? And not just for us, but for our entire family. There are a host of things we're looking for in order for that comfort level to exist.

The truth is, there's a lot going on in our Sunday morning worship.

For example,

- are we a friendly church? Do we make you feel welcome?
- Can you relate to the style of worship? Do you like the music?
- Are we traditional enough? Modern enough?
- Do you find enough meaning and inspiration in the sermon time?
- And again, is there something in the worship experience for all of the family members?

II.

However, as we think about our *comfort level* in the worship experience, there's always an impulse in the Bible—a voice that is distinctly biblical—that takes us ***out of our comfort zone***. Hopefully, most of us know this and even expect it from time to time.

Certainly, the *prophets* do this and so does Jesus. With the prophets, it's part of their function and purpose. As God's messenger to us and to our wider culture, the *prophet* calls us out of any waywardness that has crept into our lives. When we violate our foundational covenants and disregard Commandment truth, the *prophetic voice* rings loudly in our ear, as well it should.

1. When we exploit the poor and take advantage of the weak—as with King David and Bathsheba, and the prophet Nathan, no doubt trembling with fear, encounters David and calls him to a humbling repentance ...
2. When we become too full of ourselves, lose perspective and greed rises up in our spirit ... which is precisely what caused the economic crisis that has gripped our nation and our world—the reckless leveraging and widespread deregulation ... all because of greed.

The word of the prophet is a word that makes us uneasy and uncomfortable. What happens with us humans is that, easily, we get cozy with the way things are—with all the

money we're making off sub-prime loans—loans the banks and S & L's shouldn't be making, and loans many of us can't afford.

When life is good and—everywhere—money is flowing, there's a tendency to take God for granted and think, for sure: God is on our side.

We humans love to domesticate God, making God our big-time buddy, our number one fan, head of our support team; to where we just assume that God supports whatever we do—the war that we make and the ways we exploit the poor, the disadvantaged, the environment and on and on.

Easily, we forget Isaiah 55:8-9 ... *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

And then, one day, the HOLY comes close and nudges us *out of our comfort zone* ... and everything changes.

We preachers love this text from **Isaiah 6**, known as *the call of Isaiah*. It's a powerful text. If we let it, it will change our lives. When the HOLY comes close, it's all about God; and, truth be told, it can be overwhelming; and soon any of us can be on the edge of radical change.

CHECK IT OUT, friends!

III.

In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord ... this is Isaiah talking, first Isaiah, the 8th century prophet BCE—before the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE.

So there's Isaiah, sitting in the temple, having this life-changing experience.

I saw the Lord, he says, sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Angels were in attendance above him; each had six wings—with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.

*And one called to another, **Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.***

*And at this, the pivots of the thresholds of the temple shook and the entire temple was filled with smoke. And I said, **Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live with a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.***

Again, this is Isaiah's encounter with the HOLY. But it might be any one of us. Moving on ...

*Then one of the angels flew down to me, holding a **burning coal taken from the altar** with a pair of tongs. And the angel **touched my mouth** with it and said:*

Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt is gone and your sin is blotted out.

*Then I heard the voice of the LORD saying, **Whom shall I send ... who will be my messenger?** And I said, **Here I am, Lord; I will go, send me.***

IV.

When the HOLY comes close, we're totally *out of our comfort zone*, utterly vulnerable to the purposes of God and to the ways of the Holy One. Such encounters—riddled with mystery as they are—are always greater and more gripping than our ability to understand them or explain them.

What often happens when the HOLY comes close is that—immediately—we become confessional and introspective. How can we not? When we're in the presence of the **Holy God**, the **One** who is totally other, the **Holy God** who called the world into being, set the earth on its course, and breathed into our ancestors the life-force of creation.

Confession is a good thing. We all have things we need to confess, however large or small. And in the process, as with Isaiah, two things happen. First, our guilt is taken away; and, secondly, our lives get re-committed and re-directed. Such is the nature of confession; that's how it works.

For all of us ... particularly people with political and economic power, there are times when we need to be nudged *out of our comfort zone*; if for no other reason than it's a prudent safeguard. Because it's so easy for power to corrupt and to knock us off balance to where we lose our spiritual center.

When the values of the world rise up too strongly in us, easily, we get out of our rhythm as children of God, and we compromise our faith and our best spiritual self.

V.

Look at **Nicodemus** in our reading this morning from John's gospel. Why would Nicodemus, a Pharisee and, most likely, a prominent leader in the community ... why would he *come to Jesus* at night?

Clearly, there was a restlessness in his spirit, an emptiness in his soul; his life was out of balance and, somehow, he knew he needed to get his spiritual life straightened away.

No doubt, Jesus sensed this because the first thing Jesus does is knock him back a bit, *out of his comfort zone*.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus—again, at night—tells him, immediately, how impressed he is with Jesus ... how the presence of God is so obviously alive in him. And what are Jesus' first words to him?

Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Being born from above?? What is that?

Right away, Nicodemus is drawn in, *out of his comfort zone*. He has no idea what Jesus is talking about. And Jesus goes on to say, *No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit.* And again, *You must be born from above.*

VI.

What all of this is about, friends—Isaiah's deeply emotional and cleansing experience of *God's calling* in the temple—and Nicodemus, going through a time of personal searching, coming to Jesus at night ... what it's all about is that there are times in our lives when all of us need an *encounter with the holy*.

And when that happens, to whatever extent, unavoidably, we're going to be *out of our comfort zone*. If for no other reason that God is God and we are human. When the HOLY comes close, the only human response is confession ...

Confession cleanses us ... and frees us. It takes away our guilt or whatever else is burdening our spirit.

But check it out: our experience of the HOLY is never passive or indifferent. When the HOLY comes close, in short order—through confession and re-commitment—we're drawn in to God's purposes.

As people of faith, we're on call, friends ... so that when the Holy God sounds out, *Whom shall I send? Who will be my messenger.* Along with Isaiah, we respond, *Here I am, Lord! I will go, send me.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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