

Epiphany 5, Year C  
Isaiah and Luke  
February 7, 2010

At our pre-lent clergy retreat this past week our facilitator began our time together by asking us what we needed from the time we would spend together. It occurred to me at the time that this is a very good question to ask about religion in general, and Christianity in particular, that question of what it is we really need – as opposed to what it is we really want – to get out of our religion. I felt particularly lucky, or blessed, or something, therefore when I returned to the office on Thursday afternoon to write this sermon and discovered that all three of our lessons deal with this very question, albeit obliquely, and all answer it in something of the same way. All of them in one way or another tell us that what we need – again as opposed to what we want – is a call, a sense that we have been claimed by God, and called to a way of living that is not centered simply on ourselves, but rather lived in the service of that ineffable, unfathomable, beyond all everything whateveritis we point at by using the term “God.” And strangely, all three passages understand the psychological dimensions of this process of finding our call in very much the same way. It begins by being completely overwhelmed by this fathomless, incomprehensible presence, which effectively destroys any claim we might ever make on God. Then, when once our own sense of claim has been destroyed, we are freed to hear the claim God makes on us. Watch how this happens in each passage.

Isaiah beholds the glory of the Lord in the Temple; his response is “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” St. Paul tells us “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he (the risen Christ) appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” Finally we have Peter in the boat, in a story that appears in slightly different form at the end of John’s Gospel. Peter, beholding this miraculous catch of fish, a catch that nearly swamps both boats, falls to his knees and begs Jesus to leave forever, saying: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Three people confronted with the presence and power of God, each of whom retreats before this glory, moves back, overwhelmed by what he beholds.

Now because we live after Sigmund Freud it is very easy for us to misunderstand what is going on. I have heard sermons, actually pretty good ones, for example, suggesting that the problem here is that Peter had low self esteem, and that Jesus boosted his self image and made him fit to serve. Nice idea, but nonsense. Neither Isaiah, nor Paul, nor Peter suffered from low self esteem, which is a condition that arises when people began to fantasize about how they relate to other people, and to their own potential. Low self esteem is a function of not being able to fulfill and live into the false expectations that important people lay on us, and that we learn over time to lay on ourselves. That is not what was happening in any of these stories, for these three people were confronted not with the achievements or expectations of other people,

beside which they found themselves lacking, but with the glory of God, with that overwhelming manifestation of that which they could not possibly understand or comprehend in even the dimmest way, and beside which they rightly understood that they were nothing. These stories are not of Isaiah, Paul and Peter laboring under the false belief that they somehow did not measure up to what others were, these stories demonstrate that the three of them correctly understood that beside the immensity of God they were nothing and had nothing. That is true, that is correct, that is the right answer. And it was in that experience of being destroyed existentially, that they realized they had no claim on God, no way to approach what they had discerned, no place to stand in the presence of whatever this reality we call God is. That is the right answer, folks, that is the proper, not a false, self understanding. We have no claim on God, we have no right to interrogate our maker. Even when we are innocent, as Job was innocent, we have no place to stand in the presence of the one Holy One.

This searing experience, this awful moment of complete destruction, is crucial to our spiritual development, however it happens, whenever it happens. For until we have that moment of being entirely overwhelmed, of being obliterated by a power, a universe, a sense, a perception however dim, a moment, when we stand in complete awe and wonder, and yes even fear, we can allow ourselves to imagine that the purpose of our religion is to enable us precisely to establish a claim on God, we can allow ourselves to believe quite comfortably that religion is a gift given by God to enable us to have a place

where we can reasonably presume on God's goodness. So we have very good pastors with wonderful intentions and beautiful giving hearts telling us that *if* we are religious in the right way God will be good to us. If we are appropriately faithful we can claim any number of blessings that will conduce to our comfort. Preachers who talk this way do this knowing full well that both Paul and Peter were executed by the power of the Roman Government precisely for their faith; they were never as comfortable after their conversions as they were before. But never mind that, because apart from that moment of being overwhelmed by the vastness of God it is inevitable that we should imagine that religion is that which enables us to call God into our service.

But once that moment happens everything changes; once confronted, even in the briefest moment, with the overwhelming presence of God every slightest notion that we could have any claim upon God, any right to question, require, demand, is entirely destroyed and we are left as Isaiah, as Paul, as Peter were left, not as people with "low self esteem," but as people who know only that they know nothing, and who request only that this too, too muchness that is God depart.

That is a blessed and holy moment, for that is the moment when we can, if we but will, discover that the true purpose of our religion is not to arrange our lives and our liturgies in such a manner as to be able to call God into our service, but rather in that moment we can realize we are being called into a life of trust and faith in that ineffable and eternal Presence which we cannot understand,

cannot begin to comprehend, but which, in our lives is manifested to us as love. But we cannot hear that call until we finally shut up, until we realize that we have nothing we can say, nothing we can claim. Only then, when we have at last been quieted, and our demands have not just been defeated but thoroughly destroyed, can we hear that call from God.

We see this in each of our lessons; Isaiah, Paul, Peter, all of them at the moment when they are utterly overwhelmed and reduced to trembling silence in the face of the majesty before them, realize that they are called into service. It is not that they have claimed God as their own. They realize that God has claimed them. That very infinite majesty, whose presence, though beyond all being, fills all beings, has called them into service, has called them to lives in which they each will live out specific vocations of proclaiming the love of God for the world. In that service, though it made their lives very much harder than they would have been otherwise, they discovered their true purpose and found the meaning of their own existence.

And that, it seems to me, is what all of us need from our religion. We do not need answers to questions like “does God exist?” or “what is the right religion?” We do not need religion to construct elaborate frameworks explaining the inexplicable and random events that periodically both dismay and delight us, thus creating a false sense that we really do understand both God and the world. Human behavior suggests that we want those things; we want answers, we want intellectual frameworks, and the security they bring, but the larger truth is we

don't need them, and they do distract us. What we need is to hear that voice calling us into a life in which we give up ourselves to trust in the one God, whom we do not understand, and cannot control, whose presence is mercy, whose power is love, whose work is justice with compassion. That is what we need from our religion, and today we are fortunate to have the example of these three people, Isaiah, Paul and Peter, who showed us what it looks like to be silenced long enough to hear that call, and to follow.