

God the troublemaker: Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29

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Sunday's Coming Premium

June 2, 2009

At a meeting of church musicians and worship leaders, the phrase *comfort zone* was cropping up everywhere. This was the drift of the discussion: People should feel at home in worship, especially in times like these when everything moves so quickly and nothing (including our daily bread) can be taken for granted. It was crucial to avoid the bright-eyed minister who decided single-handedly and without warning to rewrite the time-honored script; the choirmaster who chose Easter Sunday to debut hot-off-the-press hymns that no one knew how to sing. Those in charge needed to respect the conservative bent of liturgy, to honor people's need to hold on tight to the Rock of their salvation. If there was to be change in the way we worship, then it would have to be gentle and prepared for. No surprises.

I was sympathetic. Though I'd like to think I'm hardly a stick in the mud, I resent worship leaders who think they know best and force everyone else to go along with them. When I'm in church I do not want to feel that there is anything experimental about it. Along with my world, I am constantly changing. I need something that is "yesterday, today and forever." If there are to be innovations, I do not want to be surprised by them.

The sense of the meeting met my approval until someone asked a question that threw me off guard. "This is all very well and good," said the woman at the rear of the room, "but is the aversion to surprise, the maintenance of a comfort zone, actually the way God acts? Is God really so user-friendly—so polite?"

My goodness! I thought immediately of Annie Dillard saying in *Holy the Firm* that she is astonished that (at least back in the day) women wore velvet or straw hats to

church rather than crash helmets. “Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.” Why? Because the One we court with eloquence and flattering speeches is a wildfire we are crazy to think we can contain. “For the sleeping god may awake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

I wonder if this unexpected point of no return is what Isaiah discovered on the day when King Uzziah died. Going into the temple of the Lord would never be taken lightly (or so we think, imagining that figures in scripture were more focused and alert, more holy than we). Still, even if he was mindful of the sacred on entering the sanctuary, Isaiah could not have imagined what was about to happen. Without warning, he beheld a vision of the invisible “I am” amid a squad of terrifying seraphim. There was smoke everywhere. The pivots of the temple trembled, threatening to turn Solomon’s world wonder into dust. Voices rose even above this fearsome noise: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” As if this were not enough, Isaiah heard a voice addressing him out of the whirlwind. He was frightened: he knew that despite the priestly trappings, he was no better than the people he served. Despite the prescribed precautions of righteousness, he was unclean—and now, in the divine presence, undone.

Or was he? Seraphim took live coals from the altar, cauterized his lips and made him able not only to hear the word of the Lord but also to speak it. But was he willing to do so? “Whom shall I send,” asked God, “and who will go for us?” Isaiah then took on a mission that would take over his life, bringing him more sorrow than joy. With the same *hineni* once spoken by Abraham and Moses when the Lord showed up out of nowhere, Isaiah said, “Here am I; send me!”

Talk about your comfort zone being violated utterly without warning or preparation! But, as the woman at the back of the room suggested, isn’t this precisely the way God acts? The psalmist thought so. Like Annie Dillard he would counsel crash helmets, safety belts, life preservers. After all, the God of glory thunders on, rampaging among the cedars of Lebanon, crashing through oaks and stripping whole forests clean. “The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness.” Could anyone have seen it coming or calculated the mayhem in God’s wake? Probably not. Nor is there anything to say in the face of so rude an awakening, except perhaps the single word the psalmist provides—“In his temple all say, ‘Glory!’”

Does this mean that worship should be a surprise party? No, but perhaps instead of only settling into the rituals that remind us of what endures, we should pray to be aware that God is faithful but not predictable. The same is true of our life's path. Sometimes we travel through green pastures and still waters; more often than not our journey takes us through wilderness lashed by wind, flashing with fire. The first is infinitely easier to take, but perhaps the latter tells us more about who the God of thunder is: troublemaker, upsetter of apple carts, the wild card in our ordered deck.