

Theophany: Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 26, 2010

The reading from Isaiah reminds us that the world is a turbulent and unsettling place. Even Isaiah is not immune; his time was one of great national grief and uncertainty, and he retreats to the temple to try and recover a sense of perspective and peace of mind. Although the passage does not tell us whether he is alone or in the midst of the worshiping congregation, Isaiah discovers firsthand the wisdom of Annie Dillard's counsel: when we go to church we should wear crash helmets, receive life preservers and be lashed to the pews in case God shows up. Isaiah experiences such a theophany, or encounter with the Holy One. He sees God's presence rock the temple and turn his whole world upside down. He catches a glimpse of the deepest reality: "The whole earth is full of God's glory."

Isaiah experiences the Holy One, to use the words of Rudolf Otto, in terms of mystery, awe and fascination. Filled with awe at God's grandeur, Isaiah receives a calling to prophetic leadership and the inspiration he needs to fulfill his vocation. He discovers that God is more than imagined and that Isaiah's life work will exceed his expectations. In spite of his imperfections, Isaiah is full of God's glory and has divine inspiration. His sinfulness does not disqualify him from being an instrument of divine revelation.

A similar dynamic is at work in the calling of Peter. In the midst of failure, Jesus asks Peter to go deeper, not only into the lake waters but also into his experience of God's abundant and caring inspiration. Jesus presents Peter with the vision of a deeper realism that embraces his failed efforts as well as God's surprising and infinite bounty.

Awakened by the vision of a larger world, Isaiah and Peter confess their sinfulness and inadequacy. The issue is not primarily one of behavior or morality, but of awe and wonder before God and the surprising power of Jesus. As Psalm 8 proclaims: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Yet we are "crowned with glory and honor."

These theophanic encounters give me comfort as I seek to live faithfully as a seminary administrator, theologian, pastor and spiritual guide. During difficult times I am often tempted to assume that I have exhausted all my resources in leadership and outreach. At such moments I am reminded that I live in a world characterized more by abundance than scarcity. When I go deeper in truth and faith, I discover new resources, energy and inspiration to deal with the challenges of congregational and institutional leadership.

Physicist John Jungerman notes that in an omniscient universe “all points are equally the center.” We too are always at the center of divine care and inspiration. Julian of Norwich imagines the fullness of God as she holds a hazelnut in her hand. “God showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. . . . I thought because of its littleness it would have suddenly fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the will of love of God.” Like that hazelnut, I am filled with God’s spirit and sustained by the energy of God’s evolving universe.

Mystical experiences inspire us to vocation and transformation. Lost in wonder, love and praise, Isaiah says yes to God’s call. Peter follows Jesus in sharing the good news of God’s coming realm. Paul receives a new name, a new life direction and a transformed vocation.

Today’s readings invite us into a world of revelation and adventure, not unlike the invitations given by Dan Brown’s *The Lost Symbol* or J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps Christians expect too little from God and too little from themselves. They see the world as flat and uninspiring when there are “thin places” and “portals” everywhere that lead into other dimensions. While we can never fully fathom the nature of divine revelation, the experiences of Isaiah, Peter and Paul remind us that life-transforming inspiration may be right around the corner, in the next encounter, or in today’s worship. We can’t presume the nature or timing of such revelatory moments. But if we affirm that God is moving through our lives, filling us with divine presence even when we are least aware of it, then we can train our senses to be ready for these moments of divine inspiration. Once we’re open to God through prayer, meditation, hospitality and mindfulness, we will find ourselves sailing into deeper waters guided by God’s inspiration.