

“Stop, Look, Listen”

February 10, 2019 ~ Epiphany 5C

Rev. Rebekah Sweet

Isaiah 6:1-8 (NRSV)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph¹ touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Luke 5:1-11 (NRSV)

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” ⁵ Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” ⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” ⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” ¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

NOTE: When I sent the bulletin to Judy three weeks ago, this sermon title sounded just right. But God has intervened. And, inspired by an article by Bishop Ken Carter that I read this week, I offer you instead, a message titled, “Stop, Look, Listen.”

OPENING PRAYER

Reveal yourself, Gracious God, within this time of worship.
Speak to us through songs we sing, prayers we speak, words we hear.
Reveal yourself, Gracious God, within your family here.
In our speaking and listening, tears and laughter, love that’s shared.
Reveal yourself, Gracious God, within these coming days.
In the places we live, the lives we live, people we meet. Amen.

Stop, Look, Listen

Isaiah is in the temple in the year that King Uzziah died—about eight centuries before Christ. King Uzziah’s death was a part of a transition from a time of independence and prosperity to one of domination by the Assyrians. While in the temple, Isaiah has an awesome experience of the holy. There is no other way to describe it. The room is filled with smoke, and the foundations shake. There are strange winged creatures in attendance, worshipping the Almighty. It is overwhelming—the holiness, the divinity, the awesomeness of God.

I read this Scripture first as a kind of judgment on us. How many of us come to church on a Sunday morning expecting the unexpected? How many of us really say, “Well, I’m entering the house of God. Anything can happen”? We have things planned out, ordered, and rehearsed; and there is nothing wrong with that. But sometimes the holy breaks in, and all of a sudden we are dealing not with **our** plans, programs or priorities, but with the One who has created all that is.

“I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty,” Isaiah said (vs. 1). Imagine you are sitting at home eating lunch on a Sunday afternoon, and as you swallow the pasta salad, one of your children says to you, “I saw God this morning on a throne, high and lifted up. There were these giant creatures, and smoke filled the room.” Maybe there is a bit of silence. Maybe you are thinking, *If this keeps up, I’m going to have to call for professional help.*

Of course, this indicates **our** need for control, and the good news—or the bad news, depending on our perspective—is that we worship a God who cannot be controlled. And so an experience of God always comes as a surprise to us in the everyday stuff of life—even in the messiness of life.

God interrupts; God intervenes. And at this point everything stops. That is the first word I want you to take away from this message: **Stop**. In a sense, coming into this sanctuary is one of the ways we stop. Taking a day (or even an hour or so) for Sabbath and worship is one of the ways we stop. Sometimes we stop in an intentional way. Sometimes we **are** stopped, because we have crossed some boundary—driving too fast, doing too much work, feeling too much stress, eating too many Buffalo wings. Sometimes events seem to conspire, and it’s as if they hold up a large red sign that says “STOP.”

Isaiah is in the temple. He stops. And even there God catches him by surprise. “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (vs. 3). God’s glory is there as kids play on a basketball court, or as people sit in an Alzheimer’s Unit, or as a choir sings. Our response, of course, is to be more aware, and that can happen only if we are willing to stop.

After we stop, we **look**. (The second word.) We look around. Once Isaiah is aware of God’s interrupting intervention, he looks around and within. Isaiah is a religious person. He is in the temple, but he knows something is wrong. He says, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a

man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips” (vs. 5). One way of knowing we are in the presence of God is the strong connection between God’s holiness and our humanity—God’s strength and our weakness. God is holy, but I am a sinner. The closer we get to God, the more aware we are that we have fallen short, that we have missed the mark.

I was in my twenties and serving two churches in a rural area. A middle-aged couple was a part of one of those churches. They seemed to have it all together: good jobs, a beautiful home, the respect of others, a couple of young adult children who lived in larger towns. The wife called me one afternoon and said, “Beckie, you need to help us do something...We need to go meet with our son. He is in trouble.” Their son lived a couple of hours away. We were going to drive there, spend some time with him, and drive back. This wasn’t on my calendar for that day. But before I could say anything, she continued, “We’ll be right over to pick you up.”

Their son had an excellent position with a large company, but as the story unfolded, he had been caught stealing. The surveillance camera recorded the whole incident. And so we were going to meet their son at his apartment, and they were going to bring him home. And then we would figure out what to do next.

Looking back, I am so grateful that they included me in all of this. It is so easy for us to be pretty superficial with each other, as if everything is okay. But of course, sometimes it is not. That’s what confession teaches us: I’m not OK, and you’re not OK; but God will make us OK.

We knocked on the door of his apartment, and he answered. He was suddenly in the presence of the two people who love him most in this world, and yet he had done something for which he felt deep shame and guilt. The three of them melted into an embrace with tears and loud groans. Their pain and his pain had become one. “I am a human of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips” (vs. 5). It helps us to say these words, because they are an invitation to God, to this Holy One who is so unlike us and yet who stoops to our weakness. The winged creature takes a piece of coal heated on the fire of the altar, places it on the mouth of the prophet, and says, “Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out” (Isaiah 6:7).

That is the heart of the gospel. Your guilt is taken away and your sin is forgiven. The prophet has an intense experience of God. The foundations of his life are shaken.// Some of us know what that feels like, too. // Two parents and their adult son knew what that was like that afternoon many years ago. There was confession and forgiveness. I remember that we joined hands and said a prayer, it truly felt like a death had taken place.

When we are in the presence of God, when we confess our sin, it is like the death of an old life. When we look at ourselves, each of us could point to areas of our life that need to die: anger, prejudice; grudges, resentment, destructive behaviors. We look at our lives and confess our sins. We open our eyes, and we see clearly the One who takes away our guilt and forgives our sin.

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After we have stopped and looked, we **listen**. This is the third word. Isaiah is in the temple. He has confessed, he has been forgiven, and then he listens. “I **heard** the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’” (vs. 8). This is the call of God. If we listen, tradition tells us, **God will speak**. And there is a call for each of us. God speaks to Isaiah in the temple. Jesus enlists the disciples and invites them to fish for people. These are reminders that *call is always connected to community*.

We were created for community. The call of God invites us more deeply into Christian community. We need community in which to test the call—to know if the call is from God. Community helps us to know if our hearts are strangely warmed because of God speaking to us or because of the pizza we ate last night!

We long for people who remind us of God’s holiness—who help us to **stop**. We yearn for people who restore us in God’s forgiveness—who help us to **look**. We search for people who rekindle within us the ability to hear God’s call—who help us to **listen**.

I distinctly remember one moment in that long and awkward afternoon when I went with my parishioners to visit their son who had been caught in the act of stealing. We had finished saying a short prayer, and just stood in silence. There was not a lot to say. Everyone was exhausted, and then the mother placed her hands on the face of her son and said to him, “We love you. Don’t ever forget that. We are your family.” She was calling her son into a deeper experience of Christian community.

Maybe God is calling you into a deeper experience of Christian community. Maybe God is calling you to share your life with a group in this church, even if it is one you start yourself. Maybe God is calling you to mentor another pilgrim on a journey of faith.

That mother was saying to her son, “You cannot do this alone; you were never intended to do this alone.”// Maybe you have been struggling with something. Maybe a voice within is speaking to you this morning, saying, “You cannot do this alone; you were never intended to do this alone.”

That afternoon I was in the presence of the Holy. God had interrupted all of our lives. Our plans, our programs, our priorities were put aside. God had burst in unannounced. There was confession and forgiveness. It was messy. And there was a call to a new life.

We need to **stop, look, and listen**. We need someone in our lives who will get our attention and say to us, “We love you. Don’t ever forget that. We are your family in the love of Christ.” Amen.

Sources used:

John Ackerman, “Stop, Look and Listen: A Way To Come and See,” *Weavings*, January/February, 2004.

Ted Wardlaw, “News From Our Forebears: The Calling Voice,” *Journal For Preachers*, Lent, 2003.