**“An Invitation into the Presence of the Holy”**

**Preached at First Worship, Old South Church, Boston**

**On May 31st, 2015**

**Isaiah 6:1-8**

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Holy One seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Almighty One, the whole earth is full of God’s glory."

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the Ruler, the Holy One."

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then I heard the voice of the Holy One saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

There is a caution printed in the Festival Worship bulletin:

“Warning! To enter into the life of this people of God is to encounter God’s soul-challenging, life-changing, radicalizing love. Will you join us? Do you dare?”

As my time as ministerial intern here at Old South Church comes to an end, I have been trying to pinpoint the time when I first began to hope I could be your intern. I think perhaps it was at the Massachusetts UCC gathering where I heard Senior Minister, Nancy Taylor, share her “Worship Credo.” You may have heard it before, here is an excerpt:

I ***believe*** worship should be thrillingly different than our oft-times prosaic lives…that the opening of worship … signals we have crossed over into time that is deep, beautiful, charged, dangerous, thrilling and sacred.

And

I ***believe*** that worship can and should engage our whole beings – body, soul and intellect – and that sounds, sights, colors, tastes, smells and movement help us to embody the lived experience of praising God.

Nancy declared to the group “people are coming out to our churches week after week to hear the word of God …. What we offer them had better be good!”

And I thought “Yes! I want to go to Old South Church and be a part of that.”

And so, in my time here, learning from John, Nancy, Anthony …. and all of you, I have pondered my own worship credo. It centers on my belief that worship should not be casual. By that I do not mean that we should not dress casually. And I do not think that worship need be stiff, formal, or perfectionistic. I really love our informal style here in First Worship. What I mean is, I don’t think we can afford to be casual *about* worship. Because, as Nancy reminded me in that presentation, in worship we come into the presence of the Holy, we encounter the living God!

If anyone could tell us about what it means to come into the presence of the holy, the living God, it must be the prophet, Isaiah. Today, we heard of Isaiah’s vision of the living God in the smoke-filled Jerusalem temple. It is a vision of such high holiness that it is terrifying, petrifying even. Just the hem of God’s robe fills the whole of Solomon’s temple. The vision takes place in the very holiest place on earth, the seat of religious power in Jerusalem. And yet this vision of God is higher, holier, and entirely other than anything else. Even the heavenly beings, the seraphs, have to cover their eyes in the presence of this searing holiness. And in this presence these creatures are singing praises to the holy God. “Holy, holy, holy is the Almighty One; the whole earth is full of God’s glory”. The temple shakes, as in an earthquake, with the shear presence of holiness.

This encounter is described in the 6th chapter of the book of Isaiah. Isaiah has already begun to prophesy. He has begun railing against the injustices and sins of the Judean culture. These injustices include neglect of orphans and widows in a culture of plenty. The injustices include corrupted officials who accept bribery and expect of gifts for favors. These sins include idolatry, and insincere sacrifices to God. This is Isaiah’s culture, his home. As a prophet, with access to the holiest parts of the temple, his life is enmeshed in the power structures of the establishment. Even as he has extended the invitation to “come walk in the light of God” to the people of Judah, he know his lips are unclean.

So, Isaiah doesn’t escape unscathed by his experience of the Holy One. The brilliance of the living God’s presence serves to remind him of his unworthiness.

He cries out “woe is me!” He is painfully aware of the jarring mismatch between his own sinfulness and God’s holiness. And yet, he is in the presence of the Holy One. Woe indeed!

But Isaiah’s unworthiness is no match for God’s holiness. The heavenly beings are ready to take care of it. One of the seraphs is poised with a burning coal. Isaiah’s lips may be purified, cleansed, by this searing holiness. Once this is done, Isaiah is fit to answer God’s call and do God’s will. Isaiah is ready to be God’s prophet, to speak God’s message of justice to the ones in power.

Isaiah’s story sheds some light on what it means to come into an experience of the living God. That cannot be done casually or comfortably. It is a serious responsibility.

Even so, week after week we have been together, here in worship, and I do believe we have encountered the holy. The chapel has not been filled with smoke. Fortunately I have not knocked over any of the candles … so far. Nor have the foundations shaken, despite the T rumbling so close by.

But God’s holy presence has been tangible. I have felt it, skin to skin, as I anointed heads with oil. The soft fuzzy heads of babies. The weathered skin of elders. The fresh skin of young adults, teens and children.

And we have tasted God’s presence in the bread we have broken together dipped in the cup, in remembrance of Jesus’ body broken and blood shed for us.

We have heard God’s presence in the Word, proclaimed with fervor each week by John, Nancy and Anthony. And we have witnessed holiness in the squirmy ones, and infirm ones; un-housed ones and unsure ones; seeking ones and the ones whom God is seeking. And in the very youngest ones who have served communion at the gluten-free station alongside Nancy.

When we have raised the roof with our alleluias, and shed holy tears over the beauty of God’s love in one another, God’s holiness has been revealed.

And our prayers, for those named and those held in the silence of our hearts have ascended to God, like the smoke of a pleasing sacrifice.

But lovely as they have been, these encounters would mean nothing, had they not changed us. Although the experience here is not as dramatic as that documented in the book of Isaiah, our holy worship experience serves that same purpose as it did for Isaiah. We hear God’s call to speak out words of justice and righteousness, and yet we are aware of our own profound unworthiness.

Perhaps, like me, you feel aware of being enmeshed in our own culture. It is a culture in which the orphan and the widow are still neglected. It’s a culture in which political power and arrogance reign. It’s a culture of plenty in which the wealth of the top 0.1% of the population is equal to that of the bottom 90%.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I know I am enmeshed, hardly in a position to speak prophetically about climate change and the environment as I gas up my car for another trip and grab quick Starbucks coffee in a takeout cup. And I’m hardly in a position to speak prophetically to the competitive culture of privilege, as I’ve sought to give my children every educational advantage.

When we stand in the presence of the living God, we are aware of our unworthiness. We know we are bound up in the sinfulness of our time. But our holy encounters are more than lovely experiences. They sear our lips, making us ready to speak.

I know that is the case because:

I have heard the choir sing out rousing songs of justice and liberation each week in worship.

I have heard the passion for justice and righteousness in the house groups that gathered throughout the winter. These informed the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization of our concerns.

I have heard the voices of BostonWarm guests who have come to be among us and share their stories. I have witnessed the OSC workers and volunteers in the Day Center listening to stories of injustice and marginalization.

I have witnessed the ongoing call to elected officials to respond to the dire situation of homelessness, rallied by the Boston Religious Leaders for Long Island Refugees.

And last week I witnessed the 200-some OSC members who crossing Copley Square to Trinity Church to raise their prophetic voices so that all God’s children might prosper.

Coming into presence of the holy is a scary prospect. And yet, Old South Church invites us in wisely and wonderfully, courageously and audaciously. Old South Church has invited me into the presence of the Holy, and it has changed me. For that I thank you!

So may we pay attention to the caution printed in the Festival Worship bulletin:

“Warning! To enter into the life of this people of God is to encounter God’s soul-challenging, life-changing, radicalizing love. Will you join us? Do you dare?”

I pray you will continue to dare, and that I will continue to dare …

May it be so, Amen

1. <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/nov/13/us-wealth-inequality-top-01-worth-as-much-as-the-bottom-90> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)