FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTACOST

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

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*“Made Ready”*

I get all kinds of emails throughout the week. Many of them are from members of the church and those are always welcome. Unfortunately, I also get a lot of emails from all kinds of places. Many of them are from sites that I have visited and so lots of them are advertisements. I spend quite a bit of time every day deleting them.

This past week, I ignored—but did not delete—one email all week long. I did not delete it because it was from a site that I usually enjoy, but I did not open it because felt as if I did not have time. Finally, as I was going through the morning ritual of deleting as much as I could I came across it again and decided to look at it quickly, so I could dispense with it.

I am so glad I took the time because it featured the Rev. Dr. Byron Thomas who offered a short reflection on the prophet Isaiah.

Rev. Thomas began by remembering Harriette Tubman and her extraordinary life. He said that while most people talk about how Harriette brought so many other people to freedom, his favorite part about her life was remembering how she first got the courage to make her escape.

Harriette was a woman of faith, and apparently she had moments in her life that other people called “spells.” Rev. Thomas believes Harriette’s “spells” were visions because what Harriette saw in her “spells” were visions of herself running away and being free.

Rev. Thomas said Harriette continued to have visions in which she led other people to freedom, too. It was because Harriette understood and embraced these visions as *Divine Agency* that she was able to believe in freedom for herself and for so many others. It was because Harriette’s visions always pointed the way to hope and new life that she knew they could only come to her from God.

I was struck by Dr. Thomas’ observation because—as he points out—this is the way in which the Book of Isaiah begins. It begins with Isaiah writing of his visions. What this means is that the information Isaiah is about to share does not come from *his* thoughts or desires. Rather, what he is about to relate is grounded in *divine agency*. It comes from a place in Isaiah’s being that has listened intently for God’s voice of righteousness and hope.

When we get to the passage we heard this morning, Isaiah’s vision has brought him to the very throne of God.

At this point, I would like to briefly touch upon the first five chapters of Isaiah which we did *not* hear this morning. The first five chapters are filled with anger and admonishment.

Starting in the very first chapter, Isaiah’s voice is the voice of an angry man, a man who has seen much in the land that is displeasing, much for him to criticize. What Isaiah saw was a people who were still going through the motions of worship, but whose lives and actions outside of their worship rituals were anything but righteous and wholesome.

What Isaiah wanted to convey to the people is that God is not deceived by their acts of piety; God was not taken-in and satisfied with them. Isaiah tells them that in the vision he has had God has balked at their hollow shows of devotion saying (in chapter one):

*11 What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
   says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams
   and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
   or of lambs, or of goats.*

*12 When you come to appear before me,
   who asked this from your hand?
   Trample my courts no more;
13 bringing offerings is futile;
   incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
   I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals
   my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
   I am weary of bearing them.
15 When you stretch out your hands,
   I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
   I will not listen;
   your hands are full of blood.*

Strong words. Words of condemnation but also words that the people needed to hear so that they could make a new start. After these words, God speaks to them again, telling them exactly what they are to do, saying,

*16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
   remove the evil of your doings
   from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
17   learn to do good;
seek justice,
   rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
   plead for the widow.*

What is amazing about Isaiah, in those first five chapters, is that everything Isaiah says is directed outward toward the people he is meant to serve. Then, in the passage we did hear, when he is confronted by the very God he loves and reveres, he is able to see his own life more clearly. He sees his own flaws. He sees how far he is from the glory possessed by God, and when he does, he does not exempt himself from his own critique. And so we heard in this passage his self-condemnation when he is given the vision of God enthroned in the heavens.

*‘Woe is me!* (he cries) *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!’* [6:5]

Isaiah thinks he is doomed, but God has a mission for him and so God also sends a remedy in the form of a seraph, who flies at him with a live, burning coal in a pair of tongs. As frightening as that sounds, the live coal is a symbol of God’s justice and compassion.

Before Isaiah can utter another sound, the seraph touches the fiery coal to his lips cleansing him from all his sins—from everything that would have made him hesitant or ashamed to continue in God’s service. In that moment, Isaiah is freed from all reluctance and inhibition, so much so, that when God asks the great assembly, “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah does not hesitate but instead enthusiastically cries out, “Here I am; send me!”

You can almost see him waving his hands excitedly, hoping and dearly desiring that he should be the one picked to serve God.

What Isaiah conveys to us in the verses of his condemnation of the people, *and* in his self-condemnation, these are stories of how God never leaves us where we are, but is always committed to leading us back into closer communion with God.

What we especially see in Isaiah is how, when he comes face-to-face with God, face-to-face with the power and perfection that is God, and is God’s love—when Isaiah encounters *that* he is immediately changed. He immediately becomes self-aware, and in this self-awareness he is able to acknowledge *his* need for God’s help, and that the help he needs will come to him out of the limitless well of compassion that is God.

It is this same lesson that Paul was attempting to convey to the church in Rome when he wrote them of living—not according to the hollow rituals of faithfulness, but rather as “*children of God, 17and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.*” [v.16-17]

What Paul wants them to understand and to take seriously is the Spirit they have received—the Spirit we celebrated last week on Pentecost Sunday. This is God’s Spirit, which was given to us because God wants to dwell within us, and what that means is a changed life, a changed focus in our lives.

Paul puts it this way: when we are heirs with Christ—*“we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”* [v.17] Which is to say, we become followers of Christ to serve God by loving God’s beloved people, and this will always require something deep and real from within us.

It will mean choosing compassion over self-interest, forgiveness over blame, choosing sharing over greed and hoarding, and hard truth over comfortable lies.

It will take courage and a willingness to trust God’s love the way Harriette Tubman trusted God and God’s desire for her freedom and the freedom of all who were enslaved.

Most of all, it means turning our worship into real change in our lives—allowing our words of devotion to move us, and to lift us out of comfortable status quo—which is really another word for “privilege”—and complacency.

It means allowing the love of God to change the lives of those around us, too, by dedicating ourselves to embracing the divine agency that wants to bring peace and well-being into the human community through people who live lives of integrity, dignity, and justice.

And our good news is that God is going to make us ready just as God has made us God’s beloved. Yes, God is going to make us ready just like God made Isaiah ready, just like God made the church in Rome ready, just like God made Harriette Tubman ready.

It probably will *not* be in the form of a live, burning coal—I do not believe we will be run-down by one of those seraphs wielding a pair of tongs—happily that has already been done. But I know that, even now, even in this moment, we are being made ready to faithfully follow, and lovingly serve.

And so my prayer for us is that we will remember those stories of how God has acted in the past, and how God is continuing to act in our time, and place, and context. And I pray that we will allow God’s powerful love to shape our lives now and forever more. Amen.