

*Lost in Wonder, Love, and Praise*

Isaiah 6:1-10; Luke 5:1-11

Whitefish UMC

February 7, 2010

- † What takes your breath away? Is it a sunset over the mountains, followed by alpenglow? An eagle spreading its wings as it leads you down a whitewater river on a canoe trip? Sometimes it's the view of the Mission mountains as you drive north up Highway 93 and crest the hill at St. Ignatius. Perhaps it's a baby's first cry or smile. Or an unexpected gift from a friend that comes just at the right time.
- † Surely the experience the prophet Isaiah describes in today's Old Testament reading would be breath-taking. As one writer says, "Although the passage does not tell us whether he is alone or in the midst of the worshipping 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 an 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."
- † Yes, the whole earth is full of the wonder of God's glory. The trouble is, we mostly don't see it or perceive it. All those things and events that I mentioned just a minute ago—the sunset, the eagle, the view of the Missions, the cry or smile of a baby, the unexpected gift—can just as easily

be missed because we are too preoccupied, too distracted, too depressed, too overwhelmed to notice.

- † The Catholic monk Thomas Merton says, “We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time... The only thing is that we don’t see it.”
- † Why don’t we see it? Yes, it’s because we’re too busy and maybe too self-focused to see God. But maybe it’s like that old song—we’re looking in all the wrong places. This afternoon we’ll be glued to our TV’s—some of us anyway—not just to watch the Super Bowl, but to watch the fabled commercials—the best that Madison Avenue has to offer. Then, of course, there’s the half-time show that meant to knock our socks off, or take our breath away in awe.
- † Trouble is, it won’t. We’ve become jaded by special effects, bombarded by products that are supposed to make us perfect, badgered by ideologues. And so we put our heads down, trudge along through the gray days, and keep on keeping on. And sometimes that’s all we can hope for.
- † But if there is one message to take home from today’s scripture lessons from both Isaiah and Luke, it is that in the midst of our ordinary lives, we are meant to experience the wonder and awe that God inspires and to be changed by it.
- † Isaiah experiences the Holy One in terms of mystery and 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 his life’s work will exceed his expectations.
- † In spite of his imperfections, Isaiah is full of God’s glory and his divine inspiration. His past does not disqualify him from being God’s instrument,

for God will make right what has been wrong and use it for healing and hope.

- † Notice the parallels with the familiar story of Jesus' calling of Peter at the lake. Jesus asks Peter to go deeper, not only into the lake waters but also into his experience of God's abundant and caring inspiration. Peter's response is puzzling to our modern ears. We might, upon witnessing the amazing catch of fish where before there had been none, have said: "Whoa! How did you do that?" or "Can I meet you here again tomorrow morning?"
- † Instead, Peter says, "Depart from me, because I am a sinful man." He feels unable to accept and comprehend what is clearly a departure from the common wisdom or worldview. This kind of power is the real "shock and awe" that we are meant to experience, that we need to incorporate into our everyday existence. And the Bible is full of it.
- † We don't like words reverence, awe, and fear so much when it comes to God these days. Fearing God is a bad thing, right? For we know too many people who have been manipulated by fear of hell, divine retribution for deviating from the norm, that sort of abuse.
- † But in ridding ourselves of God's grandeur and power and awesomeness, we've lost something our ancestors understood better—that we are meant to be lost in wonder, love, and praise. And that awe and wonder are meant to change us, to spur us into becoming instruments of God's healing, freeing, forgiving, loving, just kingdom.
- † "Awe in the face of mystery, humble acknowledgement that there is more to reality than we can comprehend, reverence for God and God's creation, is the heart of religion, and in the Bible, the essence of our own humanness." (Buchanan) Yet we try to replicate that experience with things that never really satisfy, and we fail.

- † Then we grow to expect nothing more than comfort, assurance that everything will be okay, from God. Our God becomes too small. God is meant to make us feel good. We don't expect God to show up, to shake things up, to cause us to catch our breath in thanksgiving.
- † Anne Lamott, popular writer and blogger, was interviewed on TV once again. When asked once again about her prayer life, she repeated what has become a rather famous and simple statement. She said that the two best prayers she knows are, in the morning, "Help me, help me, help me." And at night, before sleep. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."
- † But she now has a third prayer she prays at least once a day, a short prayer, a one-word prayer: "WOW!" You should say "WOW!" to God at least once a day, she advised. What would make you say "Wow!" to God?
- † On Thursday, I took a break from writing this sermon to hear Whitefish High School student Josh Schott speak about his passion for ending genocide in Darfur. He described the compelling need for commitment and energy to organize the world community, beginning with our community, to stop the destruction of an entire people.
- † Josh spoke with conviction and determination. He matter-of-factly mentioned that his group of students and followers are small. Sometimes only a few people show up to events he carefully plans and promotes in order to raise awareness and money for the effort for a just peace in Darfur.
- † After his presentation, I asked him: "Josh, what is the source of your inspiration for this project, and how do you keep on going when only a few people respond positively to your message?" Josh smiled and said, "Well my mom inspires me and has taught me to care about the world beyond mine."

- † Of course that response gladdened this mother’s heart. But what took my breath away was the answer to the second part of the question. I don’t know about you, but I’d get discouraged if only a very few people responded to my passion and if I were dismissed cavalierly in the Legislature.
- † But Josh said firmly, “When people don’t show up or support me, that only strengthens my resolve. I know how important this is, and I am not going to give up.” And so I said, “WOW!” (under my breath, of course,) to God.
- † Some days, our children, in worship, make me say “Wow!” Today it will probably be the sacrament of Holy Communion that will cause me to be lost in wonder, love, and praise. It happens most every time I serve it. It happens when I go to the nursing homes and connect beyond words with the residents.
- † I am thankful that when Peter says, responding in wonder and awe to the power of God, “Depart from me!” Jesus doesn’t do it. Instead he stays with Peter, changes Peter’s life, transforms him, gives him a new life fishing for people, gives him a truth big enough and good enough to live and die for, which is exactly what Peter does—not perfectly, not without mistakes, even betrayal.
- † And yet Jesus, full of the power of God’s Spirit, is not afraid to become small. He bends over to wash the very feet of Peter and the ones who would abandon him at the cross. And that ought to take our breath away, too.
- † For God’s power comes in the form of one not afraid to take the form of a servant, refusing the trappings of power for a heart home instead with the most humble and forgotten as well as the with the wealthy wise enough to know God incarnate among them.

- † In a few moments, we will partake in a feast to rival any Super Bowl feed. As you come forward, pray. Maybe “Help me, Help me, Help me” and “Thank you, Thank you, Thank you” are a good beginning.
- † But don’t forget the “WOW!” part. And let yourself be lost in the wonder, love, and praise of God—who will not depart from you and who will leave you never the same.
- † For we remember....

Sources:

Scott Hoeszee, “This Week” at <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu>

John Buchanan, “Reverence,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Bruce Epperly, “Living by the Word,” Christian Century, January 26, 2010