

Luke 5:1-11; Isaiah 6:1-8

“The Holy God Who Works with Broken People”

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Theologian Karl Barth once said, “We must speak of God, but we are unable to do so, and it is in trying and failing that we give glory to God.”

Throughout the season of Epiphany I have been preaching on these stories that try and fail to speak of God, stories that give God glory despite the fact that they are told by broken people. In the story of the Magi, we see that it is in God’s character to work within a world God turns upside-down: giving the front row seat to seeing the savior to the determined foreigners not the powerful ruler. In the story of Jesus’ Baptism, we see that it is in God’s character to share solidarity with sinners, to adopt us into the family of God, to call us beloved ones. In the story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding, we see that it is in God’s character to generously encourage community, celebration, and joy. In the story of Ezra reading the Torah to the returned exiles, we see that God shows up, revealing God’s love through interpreted scripture, where all the people gather together. In the story of Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth, we see God incarnate preaching a sermon, making known to us the messiah’s mission we are called to accomplish alongside him: bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. In the story of Jeremiah’s call to be a prophet, we see God reaching down and touching the prophet’s mouth, establishing intimacy that casts out fear that, as adopted children of God, we re-experience and remember every time we come to the communion table. These stories are just God’s people naming and sharing where they saw God: on a road trip, by a river, at a wedding, in community, during a sermon, interrupting their everyday lives.

As I’ve preached each sermon, I’ve prayed that more of you might find in these stories the courage to share your own. We each have little epiphanies, light by which we see God in our daily lives, and we all benefit when we share them with one another. Perhaps you have this narrative you tell yourself: well my story is not important, my testimony is not impressive. Broken people often try to say they are too broken to be of any use. Well, the title of today’s sermon is: “The Holy God who works with Broken People.”

First, we'll find in the story "the Holy God." God is holy. Isaiah describes seeing the Lord. You get a crick in your neck seeing how large and tall and high and lofty is the Lord even as the Lord is sitting. The Lord sits on a throne, we have this regal imagery, the Lord wears a robe, the hem of which fills the temple meaning the rest of it is even larger and spilling out. The Lord is surrounded by angels singing in continual worship a song of praise that echoes in the prayers of our Jewish siblings in faith, our Catholic siblings in faith, recognized in our own liturgy, in the worship bands of fundamentalist Christian churches, and in the organ swells of ever community of Jesus followers I have ever worshipped with: Holy Holy Holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. The temptation for me, every time I read those words, is to sing it instead, with deep loud resonate melodies accompanied by cymbal crashes and saxophone riffs and flute trills and trumpet blasts and key changes...music! that for me encapsulate some of the shaking thresholds, the smoke-filled place of worship, the smell of the incense, the voice of the angels, the other-worldly terrific and terrible beauty! of this vision of the Holy God.

God is Holy.

Second, we'll find in the story the "broken people."

Isaiah is first a witness to this holiness. And next he responds saying: Woe. Woe. Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips! My eyes do not deserve to see all this holiness. There was an understanding, in this culture, that humans cannot look upon God and live. Isaiah believes that upon seeing this, he is going to lose his life. He believes, upon seeing this vision of the King, the LORD of hosts, that he deserves to die. Coming face to face with the glory of God puts everything in perspective, everything about yourself, everything about everyone else around you, everything is now in its proper place. Coming face to face with the glory of God, Isaiah tells us we cannot measure up to the perfection, we cannot comprehend the mystery, we cannot capture the wonder. All we created being have left to utter is Holy, Holy, Holy. I am so unholy: and upon seeing this holiness beyond all I could have ever asked to behold, I am as good as dead. I am so, so, so broken.

God is holy. People are broken. But the Holy God is the one who works with broken people. "Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has

touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” 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!” The Holy God stoops down to Isaiah’s level, communicates to Isaiah through physical means. This is how God works. We experience it through the sacraments of baptism and communion. God wants us to know we are washed clean, once dead to sin now alive in Christ and adopted as children of God: water washes clean, and in baptism water is a sign and seal of God’s grace. God wants us to know we are provided for through Christ’s life, death and resurrection, we are welcomed into the family with the new covenant: bread and wine provides for our hunger and sharing a meal communicates belonging and safety. In communion, the bread and wine are a sign and a seal of God’s grace. God wants Isaiah to know he is not too unclean, too broken, for God to call him into partnership in God’s mission work. Fire, heat, purifies metal, in our modern understanding, it sterilizes a needle, in Isaiah’s mind, it is a live coal and it means, for him, purification and life. The live coal touches his lips, and it is a sign and seal of God’s grace: his guilt has departed and his sin is blotted out.

The Holy God works with Broken people.

The problem is, some of us don’t want the Holy God to work with broken people. We like it when God stays Holy. Holy can also mean “set apart.” But the reality this story and the gospel story tells us today is that God may choose to be encountered in Holy spaces, in set apart places, in temples and churches and quiet sanctified spaces of beauty in this life, and we, religious people, like to find God there. God promises God will show up too: where two or three are gathered in my name, God says, there I am in the midst of them. But when it comes time for us to leave those spaces, or, God-forbid, when the candles are not lit correctly, or the children run around too loudly, or the pastor speaks too quickly, or the worshipper next to us dresses too shabby, or the organist plays the hymn too slowly or in any way the place meant to be holy starts to feel just a bit too ordinary, we think it is our job to make sure God stays holy and God’s space stays holy.

We, with Peter, demand of our Lord, “Go away from me, for I am a sinful human!” As if we do not serve a God who saw fit to stoop down so far to our level that God became human alongside us. A baby entering the world, laying in a trough used to feed animals; angels welcoming smelly shepherds to witness his birth first. Holy, Holy, Holy. The Beautiful mystery

of God, beloved is that God is Holy and humans are broken but God does not let that stop God from rescuing us from our own sinfulness. Jesus, God incarnate, God entering into a boat on the water, catching an abundance of fish in the sea, said to Simon (those familiar words we repeated throughout our whole Christmas Eve service, reading it as it reappears again and again throughout scripture): “Do not be afraid; Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid: from now on you will be catching people.”

Don't try to keep The Holy God at arms-length, beloved. It's not going to work. God is worthy of worship, yes. God knows we need confession and assurance, yes. God meets us in these holy spaces, yes. But God does not stop there. God calls in the temple: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” just as Jesus calls in his sermon, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me for the Spirit has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,” the incarcerated, the disabled, and the oppressed. God reaches out to us on a physical level through baptism and communion, claiming us as God's own and providing for us all the safety and belonging we need to bring food, freedom, fairness, and favor to our fallen world. Right here, beloved, is where God intends to build upon God's established Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven and God calls you and I, broken people, to do the work alongside the Holy One.

Does that mean that you and I are not broken anymore? No. That's why every Sunday we have a new prayer of confession and a new assurance of pardon because, as they say in the Black Church, “God's not done with me yet.” So when I say I'm teaching a Sunday school class that will look at our discomfort with people different from ourselves: Black people, indigenous people, people of color, people in the LGBTQIA+ community, people with disabilities, poor people, people God shows us that God prioritizes in God's upside-down kingdom, when I say I'm teaching that class so that we can face our discomforts with people different from us, that does not mean I think y'all are bad people. That means I know I'm broken and I've learned a lot and I'd like to share with you what I've learned about meeting marginalized people in ministry and doing better than what I was able to do before, by the grace of God who is always at work within us, God's beloved broken people. Please do sign up, the clip board is in the back.

When Jesus says “do not be afraid,” when the Lord says to Isaiah: “your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out” this is the story Holy God choosing to work with Broken People. May the words: Here I am, Lord, be on our lips and in our hearts. Amen.