

Trinity Sunday
May 27, 2018

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John 14:25-27
Isaiah 6:1-8

Remember

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord. – Isaiah 6:1a



An old man used to walk along a weathered pier on the east coast of Florida. Until his death in 1973, he would return every time he was in Florida, walking slowly and slightly stooped, carrying a bucket of shrimp. The sea gulls would gather around him and he would feed them from his bucket. It was gratitude that brought Eddie Rickenbacker there, gratitude and memory. He remembered, how in October of 1942, he was on a mission to deliver a message from the President of the United States to General MacArthur in New Guinea, when a broken navigation system took the B-17D Flying Fortress hundreds of miles off course. The fuel ran out, and the plane went down in a remote part of the Central Pacific. For nearly a month Captain Eddie Rickenbacker and the crew fought the water, and the weather, and the scorching sun. Giant sharks rammed their tiny rafts. Of all their enemies at sea, the most difficult of all were starvation and thirst. Rations were gone in a week. It would take a miracle for the crew to survive.

Here's how Rickenbacker remembered what happened in his words:

“With the New Testament as an inspiration we held morning and evening prayers...

Cherry [the B-17 pilot, Captain William Cherry] read the daily devotions with quotes from Matthew. About an hour later when I was dozing with my hat pulled down over my eyes, a gull appeared from nowhere and landed on my hat....

I knew he was there. And I knew that if I missed this one, I'd never find another one to sit on my hat.”¹

As Paul Harvey used to say, the rest of the story is history. Captain Eddie caught the gull that was somehow there, hundreds of miles from land. They divided the meat, ate it and used the scraps to catch fish. All but one of the flyers survived the ordeal.

And now you know why Rickenbacker walked along a lonely stretch of Florida seacoast feeding the gulls, why he gave back – because he remembered.

Memorial Day is tomorrow, a day set aside to honor the sacrifice of men and women who gave their lives in defense of freedom. Originally it was known as Decoration Day, a day to adorn the graves of fallen service members. More than anything Memorial Day is a time to remember, remember and give thanks. Remember and give back.

For the families of the fallen, their loved ones' deaths changed everything. In almost every case, it was their watershed moment, the event that divided time into two parts – before and after. I

suspect that you have some kind of similar event, a moment so important that you mark your personal history by it.

For my parents' generation it was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; for mine it was John F. Kennedy's assassination; for others it was 9/11. Maybe you identify with one of those, or perhaps the event that divided time for you was something more personal – before and after you were married, before and after the baby, before and after you lost your job, before and after the diagnosis. ...

For the 8th century Hebrew prophet Isaiah, the event was the death of King Uzziah. For Isaiah and the Hebrew people, Uzziah's death changed everything. According to the Talmud, Uzziah was Isaiah's first cousin.ⁱⁱ

He ruled 52 years. Uzziah had been a good king, not a perfect one, but good, and enormously better than those who came after him.

And Isaiah remembered. He grieved Uzziah's death. We know what that's like, don't we? The shock and the sadness of it brought Isaiah to the sanctuary. In his grief he did the only reasonable thing -- he came into the house of the Lord. The death of the beloved king brought Isaiah to his knees.

That is when he saw God. What happened is what biblical scholars call a Theophany, a holy appearance. Theophanies are rare and always strange (go home this afternoon and read what the prophet Ezekiel saw when God appeared to him in chapter 1.) Theophanies are sometimes terrifying, always awe-filled, as we will see in a moment. But first I want to note that this is how it works. It's often in our low moments, when we are in the greatest physical, spiritual, and emotional stress that God shows up – or maybe, these are simply the times when we are most aware, and open to the presence of God.

Listen to the account of Isaiah's vision from chapter 6 of Isaiah. These are the prophet's own words:

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

*"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 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!"

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 word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray:

What are we really saying when we call you Holy, Lord? Are there any words that we can use to approximate your glory and endless love? We can scarcely come close, and yet, in your mercy, you come to us. You surround us and fill us with your Holy Spirit; you speak a word that, though it is sometimes puzzling, is always true. Holy God, receive our worship today. Be our life; be our faith, our hope. . Lead us from sorrow and deliver us from fear that we may serve you well, all the days of our lives, in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Isaiah had a vision. He saw God, high and lofty; he experienced the magnificence and the glory of God, and when he did, he realized his own unworthiness. That is natural; at least I hope it always is. In the kind of God-is-my buddy-buddy theology that’s popular, we lose some of that awe and wonder. Isaiah’s response to God’s presence isn’t buddy-buddy, it’s fear and trembling. He admits that he is a sinner and that he lives among sinful people. Peter does the same thing. Remember? Peter had been fishing all night and caught nothing. He was ready to give up when Jesus suggested he cast his net on the other side of the boat. He’d already tried that several times, but Peter agreed, and to his astonishment, he caught so many fish he had to call to shore for help. To his credit, Peter didn’t say, “How did you do that?” or, “Would you mind meeting me here again tomorrow?” Instead Peter cried, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Confronted with the power of God, Peter recognized his own inadequacy. And so do we. Every day I discover more and more my own deep need for God’s help and mercy, and yours.

And the country? We live in the greatest country in the world, and every day we break God’s heart. Another school shooting -- the 23rd in 21 weeks just this year. Isaiah’s cousin, Uzziah’s grandson, King Ahaz sacrificed his children on a pagan altar. God’s judgement on him was swift and fierce. If we don’t do something immediately to protect our teachers and children that God so loves, then I have every reason to believe our judgement will be the same. There are many solutions, not just one, and the problem is going to require that we use them all, not just one, and that we listen to each other. This is our crucible.

This passage from Isaiah ought to be our pattern. Are we inadequate and flawed? Of course we are. But just as I regularly underestimate my own usefulness to God, I also underestimate God’s power and purpose. As soon as Isaiah’s plea reached God’s ears, God’s seraph reached down and touched him. Forgiven – just like that! Forgiven, capable, courageous. That is exactly what we announce every Sunday, after we confess our sins, one of us stands and declares, “In the name of Jesus we are forgiven! Now go out there and act like it.”

To his eternal credit, Isaiah does just that. He could have said, “thanks be to God,” and gone out to brunch. But instead, he stepped up. He remembered the mighty acts of God on behalf of his people. So, when God asked,

Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

Isaiah quickly replied:

“Here am I; send me!”

In the Bible the call to remember is a call to action. It is: “Here am I, Lord, send me!” Just as a true Memorial Day observance is not a mental exercise but a genuine commitment to honoring those who gave their lives for us by working for a safer, kinder, and more just community, remembering God’s glory requires sustained action.

Hebrews 13:3 says, “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison yourself.” “Remember” doesn’t mean a fond, private reflection, but an active presence. It means, “Go help them.” Visit them, as if you were visiting Christ. When the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy commands Israel to “remember that you were once slaves in Egypt,”^{iv} it is speaking about the just treatment of workers. Remember.

Isaiah did. With the possible exception of Moses, Isaiah would become the greatest prophet the people of Judah had ever known, as well as an inspiration for much of Jesus’ preaching. Isaiah was brave and faithful. He never minced words. He spoke boldly of God, for God, and he sometimes got into trouble for it.

And we remember Isaiah’s courage, and the sacrifices of the people whose names are written here on this floor, and in our hearts. They are the “great cloud of witnesses”^v described in Hebrews, the ones that the Holy Spirit helps us to recall.

And most of all we remember the sacrifice of the one memorialized at this table. He said, “This is my body broken for you...the cup of the new covenant in my blood.” As his people, it is our duty to ensure that the world never forgets, that people keep alive Jesus’ name, his life, his sacrifice on our behalf. And so we come to this table – to remember God’s mighty acts.

To remember how, in 1942 a seagull appeared out of nowhere allowing 7 airmen to live and tell the story.

In the summer of 1987 Northwest Airlines flight 225 took off from Detroit International and crashed shortly after killing 155. The only survivor was a four year old named Cecelia Crocker. At first investigators assumed that she was a passenger in a car that had been struck by the aircraft, but when they check the manifest, they found Cecelia’s name on it. She survived because just before the crash her mother unbuckled her own seatbelt, got down on her knees, and wrapped her arms around her little girl.

Today an adult, Cecelia wears a tattoo of a plane on the inside of her wrist -- to remember.

It’s hard to explain exactly what God did for us in Jesus Christ, but what Cecelia Crocker’s mom did was pretty close. Christ wrapped the sacrifice of his own body around us, to give us life. And we remember.

ⁱ Eddie Rickenbacker, *Seven Came Through*, Doubleday, 1943, 11

ⁱⁱ *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Sotah, Folio 10b

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 5:1-8

^{iv} Deuteronomy 5:15

^v Hebrews 12:1