

**Encountering the Holy**  
**Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11**  
**February 10th, 2019**  
**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake**

According to the Pew Forum, 49 percent of the U.S. public claims to have had a *religious* or *mystical* experience, defined as a “*moment of sudden religious insight or awakening.*” This is good but challenging news to today’s spiritual leaders and preachers, since a growing number of these “*mystics*” define themselves as “*spiritual but not religious.*” Many people, including regular church attendees, believe that the last place they might encounter the holy in a dramatic way is at church.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, many church members find that *yoga, energy work, Buddhist meditation, stress reduction practices, and creative visualization exercises* are more relevant to their daily spirituality than Sunday worship or Bible studies.

But this week’s readings from Isaiah and Luke invite us to see *the church* as a laboratory of *spiritual experience* where people come to expect *transformation*.<sup>2</sup>

Dare we assert that the one who calls us to live *justly* also calls us to live *mystically*? Dare we make *contemplation*, along with *action*, a priority in the life of the church?

You see, *the reading from Isaiah* reminds us that the world is a turbulent and unsettling place. Even Isaiah is not immune; his time was one of great national grief and uncertainty, and he retreats to the *temple* to try and recover a sense of perspective and peace of mind.

Although the passage does not tell us whether he is alone or in the midst of the worshiping 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 a *theophany*, or *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.*”

Isaiah experiences the *Holy One*, ... in terms of “*mystery, 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 he *imagined*, and that Isaiah’s life work will exceed his *expectations*. In spite of his imperfections, Isaiah is full of God’s glory and has divine inspiration. His *sinfulness* does not disqualify him from being an instrument of divine revelation.<sup>3</sup>

One enduring hymn (based on Isaiah 6) from the early 19th century is “*Holy, Holy, Holy,*” with a text by the Anglican poet and bishop *Reginald Heber* and a tune by *John B. Dykes*. This stately, regal hymn voices a dimension of gospel faith that is almost lost in the *sweet romanticism* of much recent church music.

In a frightened, lonely culture of alienation like ours, the accent of much current church music concerns intimate *one-on-one* contact with God. The lyrics and the music together offer intimacy with God. In the midst of such music, this hymn stands as a mighty insistence that the *reality of God* cannot be reduced to comfortable, reassuring companionship. The hymn insists that the God the church worships is an *awesome sovereign* to whom willing yielding is appropriate.<sup>4</sup>

A similar dynamic is at work in the calling of *Peter*. In the midst of failure, Jesus asks Peter to go *deeper*, not only into the lake waters but also into his experience of God’s abundant and caring inspiration. Jesus presents Peter with the vision of a *deeper realism* that embraces his failed efforts as well as God’s surprising and infinite bounty.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce G. Epperly, “*Vocation and Transformation,*” February 1, 2010

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Bruce G. Epperly, “*Theophany,*” January 26, 2010

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “*The Great Drama of the Trinitarian Hymn, Holy, Holy, Holy,*” December 10, 2018

And so, awakened by the *vision of a larger world*, Isaiah and Peter confess their sinfulness and inadequacy. The issue is *not* primarily one of behavior or morality, but of *awe and wonder* before God and the surprising power of Jesus.

As Psalm 8 proclaims: “*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*” Yet we are “*crowned with glory and honor.*”

Physicist John Jungerman notes that in an *omni-centered* universe “*all points are equally the center.*” We too are always at the *center* of divine care and inspiration.

Julian of Norwich imagines the fullness of God as she holds a *hazelnut* in her hand. “*God showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. . . . I thought because of its littleness it would have suddenly fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the will of love of God.*”

Like that hazelnut, we are filled with God’s spirit and sustained by the energy of God’s evolving universe.

The point is that *mystical experiences* inspire us to *vocation and transformation*. Lost in wonder, love and praise, Isaiah says *yes* to God’s call. Peter follows Jesus in sharing the good news of God’s coming realm.

Like Isaiah, like Simon Peter, *and like all the others who go before us*, we are called in the midst of our daily lives to serve in God’s mission for the world. Cast your nets, write your papers, teach your students, balance financial accounts, design the buildings, pour the concrete, make the lattes, lead the meetings, administer the IVs, answer the phones, sing the arias. *Do what you know how to do, and Jesus will use it to draw others into the kingdom of God.*

Rarely does God reveal to us our destination. Instead, God reveals to us the *means* through which we are called to participate in God’s end result. While we do what we are created, equipped, and skilled to do, we entrust the result to God.<sup>5</sup>

Friends, today’s readings invite us into a world of *revelation and adventure*, not unlike the invitations given by Dan Brown’s *The Lost Symbol*, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, or J.K. Rowling’s, Harry Potter.

Perhaps Christians expect *too little* from God and *too little* from themselves. They see the world as *flat and uninspiring* when there are “*thin places*” and “*portals*” everywhere that lead into other dimensions.

While we can never fully fathom the nature of divine revelation, the experiences of Isaiah and Peter remind us that life-transforming inspiration may be right around the corner, in the next encounter, or in today’s worship. We can’t presume the nature or timing of such revelatory moments. But if we affirm that God is moving through our lives, filling us with divine presence even when we are least aware of it, then we can train our senses to be ready for these moments of divine inspiration.

Once we’re open to God through *prayer, meditation, hospitality and mindfulness*, we will find ourselves sailing into deeper waters guided by God’s inspiration.<sup>6</sup>

Let us pray—

Lord,

We are yours and you have called us in the midst of daily lives to follow you, to serve you, to spread your good news.

We want to do so, but we often feel unworthy, we feel like we are the chief of sinners, we feel unclean, and not holy at all. Your holiness, your love, and your presence scares us.

Calm our fears, dry our tears, that we may know deep within ourselves your love, grace and forgiveness.

Empower us to follow you, to serve you, and to tell others the good news.<sup>7</sup> *Amen.*

<sup>5</sup> Lauren Dow Wegner, “*Jesus Calls Peter, But There’s a Catch*,” January 2, 2019

<sup>6</sup> Bruce G. Epperly, “*Theophany*,” January 26, 2010

<sup>7</sup> RevGalBlogPals, February 10, 2010