



June 11, 2006

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

TRINITY SUNDAY

Isaiah 6:1-8

I Cor 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

“Woe is Me!”

I ran across an interesting quote by someone named Irv Kupcinet. I have no idea who this person might be, but he sure got me thinking. This is what he said: *What can you say about a society that says God is dead and Elvis is alive?*

The on-going existence of Elvis has become something of a joke- not many take it seriously. But there was a time when some did. Weird bunch of folks, aren't we? “But,” you might protest, “WE are CHURCH folks! WE don't believe God is dead.”

We don't believe God is dead, I recognize that. But I'm not sure we believe God is AS ALIVE as God REALLY IS.

One example: People don't generally swear in church. Now, I know that some of you don't swear at all. But I bet at least 50% of you swear sometimes. Like when you hit your thumbnail with a hammer. Or a tire blows out when you're driving on the expressway. But most everybody manages to refrain from swearing in church. Why? I expect it's because we think God might not like it. But why do we feel free to do and say any old thing once we step outside the church doors? Can't God hear us any more? When we put it that way, we can see we're pretty ridiculous. God observes us everywhere! But do we REALLY BELIEVE that? REALLY? Does God have that much interest in our little daily doings, thoughts, words and feelings? Is God really watching us ALL THE TIME?

In the church, we talk about the presence of God. We celebrate the presence of God. We rejoice in God's reality: everywhere, in all times, circumstances and places. We share stories of our lives, describing times when we felt close to God, to his power

and presence. Most of these are stories of comfort we received, or the awe we felt before God's majesty, or the gratitude we felt before his goodness.

I am convinced these are real, powerful and meaningful encounters with God. But I also believe they are selectively filtered and remembered. We sift out things we don't want to feel or know about God. We go for "warm fuzzies"--- convincing ourselves that's all there is to the kind, merciful, benevolent God we believe in and worship.

Our Scriptures for today challenge that comfortable viewpoint. All three readings describe a human encounter with God. All three show us God is real, alive, and knows us completely. All three reveal that when we stand before God, with few filters or screens to protect us, we are overwhelmed by the realization of who we really are. "Woe is me!" we cry. "God have mercy." Isaiah, Paul and Peter all felt it. "Woe is me."

Let's start with Isaiah. Isaiah the prophet was at this point not yet a prophet. He was a young man, probably in the Temple for a religious ritual. Isaiah believed in God in an intellectual way--- with his MIND. He believed, with his MIND, that God knows everything, sees everything, is present everywhere. He believed in an omniscient omnipresent God. This belief, as long as it remains in our MINDS may be reassuring. But soon, in a vision, this knowledge moved from Isaiah's MIND into an ACTUAL EXPERIENCE. Isaiah saw God- the REAL all-knowing, all-seeing God. And Isaiah melted into whimpers of woe. "Oh, no! I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips. I live in the midst of people of unclean lips. My eyes have seen God, and now I know who I am."

To experience the presence of God, to BE WITH the One who KNOWS EVERYTHING, means no shameful deceptions can be hidden, no excuses bear any weight of truth. THIS IS OVERWHELMING. Isaiah saw God in the Temple and cried, "I am really a mess--- everyone I know is a mess!"

Paul, who lived during the time of Christ, was convinced the Christian movement was a heresy that was threatening the integrity of the Jewish faith. He was sure he was a holy man, even as he persecuted and observed executions of these Christ- followers.

Then, traveling to the city of Damascus, on a mission of persecution, Paul was blinded by a vision of Christ and heard Christ's voice. He encountered God through Christ and later admitted, "I am not worthy to be called an apostle; I'm like one abnormally born. I persecuted the church of God."

Peter saw God in Jesus also. Jesus sent him out into deep waters after a night of fruitless fishing. In just a few minutes, after following Jesus' instructions, Peter hauled up nets breaking under the weight of the catch.

Instead of saying, “Hey, way to go, Jesus!” and whooping over his success, Peter fell down at Jesus’ feet and cried out, “Go away from me, Lord! I am a sinful man.” Go away, God, don’t look at me; I don’t want you to see all that you see. Go away, go away, let me hide.

I wonder how many of us allow ourselves to experience the whole reality of God? Because I don’t hear many voices like Isaiah’s, or Paul’s, or Peter’s. I don’t hear them in our culture; I don’t hear them in the church. I don’t hear people bemoaning their own unworthiness or recognizing their sin. I often hear people talking about OTHER people’s evil. We fuss about politicians, about criminals, about other cultures, about other religious groups. We end up feeling pretty good; thankful WE aren’t so terrible after all.

Jesus didn’t stand for that. People in his time clucked over adulterers and felt superior to them. And what did Jesus say? He said, “Hey, don’t think you’re any different, really! Have you ever looked at someone and lusted after them—wanting to possess them, use them for your own satisfaction? Have you? Well, you’re an adulterer, too.” People were proud of never having killed anyone and Jesus said, “Oho! You think you’ve never killed—well, if you ever even said, ‘You fool!’ to another person, you’ve committed murder.”

Encounters with God may be comforting, but they should be disturbing, too. Actually, if we trust these stories from the Bible, we learn that our encounters with God are likely to be disturbing FIRST, and the comfort, strangely, comes through or with the disturbance.

Isaiah was overwhelmed by his unworthiness, but he was cleansed by God, who touched his lips with holy fire and declared, “Your guilt is taken away and your sin forgiven.” Paul was pierced by the realization of what he had been doing in persecuting the church. But he was claimed, taken as one of Christ’s own. Paul was born, though in a strange way, as an apostle of Christ. Peter begged Jesus to leave him; the eye of God upon him burned like a searing brand. But Jesus didn’t leave Peter. He drew Peter closer, to become an instrument of God. Peter became a “catcher”; a rescuer of God’s bewildered and lost fish.

God never reveals our sin to destroy us. God reveals our sin to save us. In the very moment we see who we are, God forgives our sin and says, “Now, see, THIS is who you are to be: a prophet, an apostle, a follower of Jesus the Christ.” God does not find whole, clean, unbroken, sinless people to inhabit, direct, guide and use as holy instruments. There aren’t any people like that. God uses those who have seen and believed in their brokenness, in their sin and unworthiness.

If we don’t see our sin, we kid ourselves about who we are, what we are capable of. We think we are wiser than we are. We can know what’s right--- for our kids, for our

neighbors, for our country--- it's SIMPLE! We don't even need God to help us sort it out very much, or to make it come to pass.

When we see and know our sin, we know we have distinct limits. We can be wrong, very wrong. We need God to help us face the temptations of arrogance and self-righteousness. When we see how much we need God for this, THEN God can use us to accomplish his marvels and wonders. **God will call us from our sorrow over our sins to missions of mercy and justice.**

Isaiah went from his encounter with God to share an unpopular message with his people: *Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and rob my oppressed people of justice.*

Paul went from his encounter with God to preach that there is no "in-crowd" with God: we are all one in Christ Jesus, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female.

Peter went from his encounter with God to heal and preach- to bring saving words to people grappling with sorrow, pain and struggle.

God is alive. I don't know about Elvis. But GOD is alive. God knows us through and through. May we have the courage to let God show us our sin, day by day by day. May we know that WE are a people of unclean lips. May we discover that, through the facing of our sin, we are forgiven and equipped by God to serve.

God never reveals our sin to destroy us. God reveals our sin to save us—SO THAT we can be his agents in the world. We are given missions of mercy and justice. We are sinners, loved, forgiven, claimed sinners. God calls us, the people we are, asking, "Who will go for us? Whom shall I send?" What will be our answer?