

WOE! Woe is Me!
Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17

Today is Trinity Sunday in the Christian calendar. Oh, I am very aware that the secular world focuses on this being Memorial Day weekend, however, in our worship we would be remiss were we to ignore Trinity Sunday.

Why should we celebrate the Holy Trinity? That question was asked by a colleague this week in our discussion group. Last week we celebrated Pentecost Sunday, the coming of the Holy Spirit to the earliest followers of Jesus Christ, as he ascended into heaven to sit on the right hand of God Almighty. This then is to celebrate the presence of the 3-in-1, Trinity. God the Father and Creator, Jesus Christ, the Son, who has redeemed each of us as he was crucified, dead and buried, rising to new life on the third day; and the Holy Spirit, the promised Advocate who abides with us and sustains us today and every day.

Today we read from two very familiar passages. The call narrative of the Prophet Isaiah reminds us that no matter whom or to what God calls, God calls each and every one to be in mission with God, because we have encountered God, because we have been brought face to face with God's holiness and our brokenness, and because we have been made whole by God's grace. There is little doubt that most, if not all, have encountered the Divine and immediately responded as Isaiah did. "Woe! You must be kidding! Surely you do not mean me. Woe is me. I am a person of unclean lips."

And, as we protest, we are astonished as God makes us fit, equips us for the mission to which we have been called. This passage from Isaiah is as important in illustrating God's calling, in fact, one theologian suggested we might begin to get a sense of the significance of the event if we compare it to the assassination of JFK in the USA or maybe the more recent events of 9/11, that terrible day in 2001 when the planes flew into the World Trade Centre. The result of this encounter is dramatic. Isaiah becomes a prophet, sent out to be God's communication in the same mould as the Divine Parent who has sent him. I imagine that if Isaiah had been more keenly aware of what YHWH wanted from him, he might have skipped worship that day... However, had Isaiah skipped out, think of the blessings he would have missed, fore between the prophet's vision and sense of unworthiness, and his final gesture of readiness to go forth for God, stands a wondrous act of forgiveness.

And then we read of Nicodemus. This familiar story is relived in so many ways in our modern world. While serving a church a few years ago, I received what I considered to be a very strange phone call. The caller, a very influential man in the community, asked if I would come to his home and meet with him and his wife the following evening for dinner. Try as I might, I could not recall what church they attended; and I was very concerned about stepping into another minister's territory. I accepted the invitation and arrived at their very spacious home at the appointed time, still wondering the reason for the invitation.

They were perfect hosts. Once settled in their tastefully decorated living room, they offered me a glass of wine. This is a test, I thought, wondering if I should accept them where they were. Well, Jesus drank wine, I thought as I accepted the offer.

Nick got to the point very quickly. "You may have wondered why we invited you here. And why we suggested coming at night. The truth is, we have been intrigued by what seems to be happening in your church and we'd like to know more about it. We're a little embarrassed because we are not church goers, and at this point in our lives we can't just show up in a church anonymously and check it out. If persons saw you coming here they might wonder what is going on.

I agreed that their presence in any of the community churches would lead to considerable speculation as their profile in town was high. They were known to be wealthy, well connected, successful, and pillars of the community. "We have everything," said Nick. "That's not very modest but there is no point in getting you over here and beating around the bush. We belong to the Baby Boomer generation and we fit the stereotype ~ we ski in Aspen, sail in the Bahamas, drive a BMW, belong to the country club. Church was not a large part of either of our lives growing up but we thought we had learned the basics ~ to be ethical, and when you have a lot, give something back. So we have tried to do that. Between us we belong to most of the civic organizations in town, we sit on boards of philanthropic organizations; we have even established a modest trust of our own for charitable purposes. Surely it is not about finding ways to spend our money and enjoy ourselves."

I listened to what Nick had to say, And then I offered, "Your questions remind me of two Bible stories ~ both about successful men, both of whom wondered if they were missing the boat somehow when it came to their spiritual lives. One was a man who was young and wealthy; the other was a man who had a lot of stature in his community. Mark told one story, John the other; sometimes scholars have wondered if they are, in fact, variations on the same incident. In any case, in both stories men came to Jesus to inquire as to how they might find richer meaning in their lives. Both had become curious about the effect Jesus seemed to be having on people around him and wondered how they might experience something of that vitality and connectedness. In one case, Jesus suggested that the man give up his wealth and become a follower, but that prescription was too strong for the rich young man. In the other case, Jesus suggested that the man needed to be born again, or, more accurately, from above."

"'Born again' language makes me nervous," Nick interjected quickly, "people who call themselves 'born again' always remind me of used car salesmen. We called you because we didn't think Presbyterians were into being 'born again.'"

"It depends on how you understand it," I responded carefully. "The man who came to see Jesus didn't understand it at all at first, he thought it meant starting over again, from the beginning, from birth, you know."

"I've thought about that myself," Jennifer, quiet until now, suddenly interjected. "I've thought about how I would do things differently if I had to do them again. But you know, I don't know what I would change, really. I have followed the rules, I have lived up to everyone's expectations ~ exceeded my Father's probably. We are successful by all the standards our society taught us; we are contributors. Even if I did have the opportunity to be born over again, I don't know what I would do differently."

"Neither did Nicodemus," I responded, "besides, being a man of common sense, he thought it was a little impractical anyway."

Our conversation continued and I invited them to come to visit at my church with one stipulation, they would attend for four weeks and make NO contributions of money. At the end of this time, we met again. Nick admitted that he had struggled to make no monetary contributions, especially to some of the special needs of the community. I asked him how it had felt to merely receive, with no expectations, and once again he said he had struggled but then admitted that he had been able to give up the need to be in control, had come to a place of peace, trusting in God to lead the service and allow him to receive The Word.

They joined the church a few weeks later and have become very active in the life of the church, but they are also very active in sharing the Gospel Message with people in the community.

I realized through Nick and Jennifer that there are many really wonderful people who just need to be led by someone who has witnessed the glory of God. We are called to be God's witnesses, by what we see in our world and by what we do in our world. Seeing God's power requires prayer; doing God's will requires honesty and purpose.

When the majesty of the living God is 'set forth', there will always be the person who cries, "Woe! I am not worthy". There is no need to tell them they are sinners, for their meeting with 'the Lord Almighty' in the gospel of Christ does all the exposing necessary.

We are called, each and every one of us, as disciples of God and our purpose, the purpose of God and the purpose of Jesus the Christ, is to save the world. That is, people and institutions around us that have fallen away from the Lord God and the godly values of love, justice and goodness and their consequence of peace. Maybe it's Nick, under the cover of darkness. Perhaps it is Isaiah, seeking the presence of the Most High. Regardless of the circumstance, God needs us.