

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

True to Life

The Third Sunday After Epiphany

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The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

Isaiah 6:1-13

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." 4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." 6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." 8 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!" 9 He said, "Go and tell this people: "'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'" 10 Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." 11 Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?" And he answered: "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, 12 until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. 13 And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."

People often object to Christianity because they say “it has nothing to do with the ‘real world’.” They can’t see what good it does to believe in a heaven or hell or God when none of that has any relationship to what seems to be the real business of life: making a living, providing for your family, paying taxes, getting ahead, doing your job, and so forth. If a believer points out that faith in the Lord is a great comfort when trouble and heartache come, the skeptic will probably shrug and say things like “you just have to be strong,” or “you just pick yourself up and keep on going.”

The idea that faith in Christ is somehow irrelevant to the way people really live is a very thin and threadbare idea. When the storms of life come, it’s of no help at all. On the other hand, the gospel of Jesus Christ is exactly what we need in those times. Far from being irrelevant, the gospel is exactly true to life as human beings live it. But it starts with a God and a Jesus who are very different from the kind of God we would like to recruit as an ally in getting what we want in this life. Isaiah’s response to God and Peter’s response to Jesus show us how different the real God is from human ideas and expectations of him.

Isaiah cries out, **“Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”** Peter and his companions, experienced fishermen, have worked hard all night without catching a thing. When they fish where Jesus tells them to, an impossible avalanche of fish rips their nets and swamps their boats. Peter falls down at Jesus’ feet in terror. **“Go away from me, Lord;”** he says. **“I am a sinful man!”**

The way Isaiah and Peter responded in these situations shows us that we will never convince the God of the Bible, or his Son, to be nothing more than a resource for better living for us. He is not like that. The seraphs, the angelic beings that Isaiah sees attending him, tell us who God is. He is three times holy: **“Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD God Almighty.”** He is absolutely and intensely perfect, pure, and beautiful. But he shares his perfection with his vast and breathtaking creation. The seraphs call out to one another that **“the whole earth is full of his glory.”** The literal meaning is **“the earth is the fullness of his glory.”** Every tiniest detail of creation proclaims the vast immensity of the beauty and wisdom and holiness and perfection of our God.

Seeing the LORD in all his majesty shakes Isaiah to the core of his being. It’s a chasm of an understatement to say he’s contrite. The flash of God’s holy perfection lays bare Isaiah’s sinfulness and the sinfulness of his people, and Isaiah is horrified. But the LORD is perfect in mercy. He dispatches a seraph with

a live coal. He touches Isaiah's lips and says, "**See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.**" First, Isaiah is contrite, dreadfully conscious of his sin before God. Then he is cleansed.

Now he is called: "**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!'"** Only after Isaiah becomes contrite at seeing how abominable his own sin makes him to God, after he is cleansed by God, does he hear the voice of the Lord. He is called. "**Here am I. Send me!"**

God's call is God's command. Isaiah is to preach to God's people and warn them of their sin, though they will not listen. He is to promise destruction and scorched-earth devastation unless they repent. God's holiness is like the burning fire of his altar. It consumes every particle of sin and disobedience, with no exceptions. But part of God's message is that God's people will not repent. They will reject the only medicine that can possibly heal them. They will confirm themselves in their sinful disobedience until no one is left.

Isaiah's predicament is true to life. Contrite, cleansed, and called, he is commanded by God to announce to his people God's own words: the precious information of God's mercy and grace to those who turn from their sin. But they will not and they shall not listen. In fact, God's word to them only intensifies their impermeability to his love and grace. How many heartbroken people are there who have worked and worried and prayed and pleaded with a loved one to stop some sinful, self-destructive behavior—to no avail?

The people's predicament is true to life. They have been chosen by God as his vehicle to bring salvation to every ethnic group, every race, every language, to be God's vessel to restore and heal the broken human race. Yet they themselves are adamant, impervious to God's saving intentions for them and for the world. How many people do you know who have heard the word of God for years and are gifted, educated, and positioned to have tremendous influence for the gospel with others, but are too completely absorbed with their own lives to share Christ with others?

God's solution to these true-to-life predicaments is his grace. It's his life and favor and love to people who deserve his wrath and devastation. God's grace isn't an abstract, disembodied spiritual influence. He has sent it in a true-to-life person, his Son, Jesus Christ. Paul just about shouts it out from our reading from 1 Corinthians 15:3--"**For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance : that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.**" Why is this of first importance? Because it was **Christ** who died, the same LORD Almighty whose brilliance devastated Isaiah and shook the

foundations of the temple. Why did he die? **“For our sins according to the Scriptures.”** Or as the Lord proclaims later in Isaiah’s prophecy, predicting Jesus’ death, **“it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.11 After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.”** (Isaiah 53:10-11)

Compared to this, what kind of remedy can the so-called “real world” offer for our loneliness, our regrets, our losses, all the storms of life? How can empty phrases like “the resilience of the human spirit” ever hope to deal with the massive anguish people are experiencing in Haiti? Not to mention a hundred other places around the world.

The only real answer is the gospel of Christ. It is the good news of a God whose will is his own perfection, joy and beauty for human beings. But that perfection, joy and beauty is utterly alien to us in our sin. Though he has made us in his own image, our sinful self-absorption has distorted that image to where we can’t recognize our true selves, and he won’t recognize us. But in his love and mercy has become one of us—marvelous to say!—in Jesus. Not only that, but Jesus has died for us to cleanse us, and he has come out of the grave as the living proof of kind of human being God will transform everyone who comes to him to be: holy, perfect, beautiful, divinely human.

What should we do? We need to recognize the gravity of our true-to-life predicament before our holy God. Without his grace, we are ruined. Let us be contrite. Let us ask him to cleanse us, and he will. As Paul puts it, **“If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”** (Romans 8:31-32) Then we can hear his call, the call he makes to everyone who comes to him in faith. It’s the call to live true to life. It’s the call to obey God’s command to share God’s astonishing grace in Christ with people who are vainly searching for remedies and fixes for their “real world” losses and grief.

Let us pray.