

Let's Go Deeper...

Wednesday, August 17, 2016

Sunday's focus on Isaiah's vision of God in the Temple got me thinking about the ways in which people experience God... or not.

Some people, like Isaiah, can tell dramatic stories of their encounter with God. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him... 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."

That's quite a testimony. Isaiah could give a date (King Uzziah died in 742 B.C.), a place (the Temple), and the sights (a throne, the hem of God's robe, seraphs, smoke), sounds ("Holy, holy, holy"), and sensations ("the pivots on the thresholds shook") that accompanied his experience of the Living God.

Moses' testimony is equally dramatic (Exodus 3). A burning bush. A command, "Come no closer. Take off your sandals." A mysterious name: I AM WHO I AM or I AM WHAT I AM or I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE.

Paul had a humdinger of a theophany himself (theophany: the appearance of a deity to a human). The Damascus Road. A bright, blinding light. A voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9).

So, how about you? How you have encountered the Living God?

Some folks have had a Temple/Burning Bush/Damascus Road experience. My eldest daughter Betsy, for instance. Ten years ago, at the end of worship, 16-year-old Betsy came up to me with puffy eyes. On the verge of tears.

"Daddy," she said to me, "Can we go outside?"

We went out to the courtyard of the elementary school where our fledgling church was worshipping. We had no sooner stepped out the door when she looked up at me, her body visibly trembling, and said, "I know! I know! I know!"

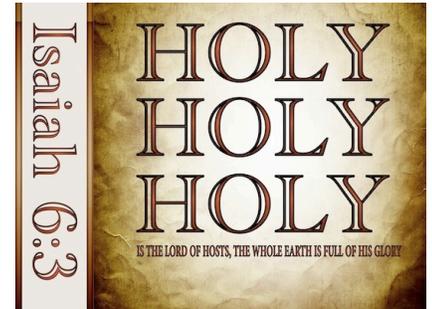
Teary, her head shaking back and forth incredulously, all she could say was, "Daddy, I know. I know. I know. It's real. It's real. It's real."

"Betsy," I asked, "What do you know? What's real?"

"God! God! God!" she said. "I know God. I know God. God is real. God is the reason we moved out here. It was God. Now I know. Now I know God."

Make of it what you will. Somehow, the Lord of Hosts came to my daughter that day in an elementary school cafeteria in the midst of ugly fluorescent lights and the folding chairs. At some point between her coming forward to receive communion at the 6' plastic table from Sam's Club that served as our altar and our singing "Go Now In Peace" accompanied by the keyboard we wheeled in and played through a portable speaker system, Betsy encountered the holy, holy, holy God who appeared in ages past to Isaiah, Moses, and Paul.

A few years after Betsy had her cafeteria theophany, several of us were talking about how people have experienced God. One of the women in the group,



Shirley, 70ish, said she really didn't have much of a story, not one anyway that I or anyone else would be interested in.

I said, "Try me. Tell me your story."

What unfolded was a story about a girl growing up in the Depression, the daughter of a mother who was three times married and divorced, promiscuous, and narcissistic. The mother left her young daughters to fend for themselves.

"It was my grandmother," the woman said, "who gave me a sense of self-worth. She made me feel loved and in her presence I felt a sense of peace. She was a Christian and as a young girl I associated the way she was with the way I wanted to be. I sensed that the love, peace, and graciousness I felt in my grandmother's presence was somehow due to her faith. All I knew was that I needed something-- what my grandmother had and my mother didn't--and whatever that something was I believed was to be found in church."

"My mother didn't go to church and my father wasn't around. I became friends with the family next door. I felt peace and love in their house. I felt the need to be in a church and so one day I asked if I could go to church with them. They took me. They were Catholic. Mass was in Latin back then. I didn't understand what was being said *but deep down inside I knew I wasn't alone there. God was there. Or I should say Jesus was there. Jesus is how I came to know what God is like. Jesus was there. And my neighbors were there right beside me.*"

"Looking back, I believe God put that family next door to me. They showed me what a family could be. They gave me a family—their family, a church family—that I didn't have. I was beginning to understand what it means to be a child of God and that made all the difference in my life."

"And that peace I told you I saw in my grandmother when I was little? When I had my bout with cancer years ago, I felt it! —that peace, that deep peace she had God gave to me, too!"

"And family? I know God brought my husband into my life. When we got married, I decided the church needed to be in the midst of our marriage. He was baptized on Maundy Thursday the first year of our marriage. And I taught Sunday School for years wanting to teach my own kids and others' kids about the Jesus I met when I was child."

"Looking back, I can see now that God has looked out for me my whole life. God is with me and has shown me unconditional love and forgiveness time and again which I need (laughing)-- I'm far from perfect— I can be opinionated and judgmental. But God's not done with me yet!"

She said, "That's about it, I guess."

I said, "I've known you six years and I never heard your story until now."

"You never asked and I guess I never thought it added up to much."

In my estimation, what her story added up to is that God, Jesus Christ, the Church, and a few people of sincere faith changed the course of that woman's life.

We all have a story to tell about how God has come to us.

Isaiah. Moses. Paul. Betsy. Shirley. Me. We all have stories.

All of them are holy, holy, holy.

Tell me yours some time.

