

"When It Is Dark Enough . . ."
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Lectionary Year C
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Texts: Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11
Dr. David T. Howeth

Where is God? When do we see him? When do we know he is present with us? When is God revealed to us most clearly? While the witness of scripture points to God's desire to be revealed and known at all times, the Bible also suggests that in certain cases, at least, it is when we are in the hour of our greatest need that we most fully experience the reality of God.

You know what it means to be in that hour of need. You know what it feels like to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. You may put it in different ways: "Things are tough right now." "We are going through a difficult time." "Things can't get much worse." "I'm just living from day to day." "There is no way to go but up."

When is your hour of greatest need? It might be when you feel you have come to the end of your rope, when you have exhausted your own resources, and when you think you have run out of possibilities. I think this may well have been how some of the disciples felt after they had spent all night fishing and had nothing to show for it.

In order to appreciate their predicament and their feelings about it, we need to keep in mind that Simon and the other disciples who were fishermen, were not fishing for pleasure. They were not recreational fishermen. These were not guys with a bass boat and a cooler who spent

their weekends on the lake getting away from their jobs and their wives. These were commercial fishermen who depended on fishing for a living. If they didn't catch fish on a given night, it created a cash flow problem that week in their business. If they were going to keep their families fed and a roof over their heads, they were going to have to catch fish every night.

The disciples like Simon were expert fishermen. They had all the right equipment to catch fish, and they possessed all the right knowledge about where the fish most likely would be on any given night. These guys couldn't afford to make a mistake, so they did everything they could to make sure that every time they got in their boats, they caught at least some fish.

Can you imagine, then, what it must have felt like to have been out all night and have come up with zero fish? Can you imagine their disappointment, their frustration, their anger, their anxiety, and their embarrassment? Things like this weren't supposed to happen to professionals, to seasoned veterans. They probably had tried everything, every trick in the book, all the lures in their tackle boxes. They probably had been over every square mile of that lake looking for fish. Don't you know they were hacked off? I would have been.

I'm not so sure I would have been as gracious to Jesus as Simon was. If I had been fishing all night long and some guy had suggested to me that all I had to do to catch fish was to let my nets down one more time, I might have told him what he could do with those nets. But Simon responded to Jesus by saying, in essence, "There is no way we are going to catch any fish today. If it were possible, we would have done it

already last night. However, because it's you who is asking, if it will make you happy, we will try it one more time. Besides, what do we have to lose? We've tried everything else."

You know what happened after that. There was such a miraculous catch of fish, that Simon Peter was prompted to fall down at Jesus' feet and confess his sins. He knew that he was in the presence of the holy, for the presence of the holy always puts us in touch with our unholiness.

These disciples experienced the reality of the presence and the power of Jesus when and only when they had come to the end of their rope, had exhausted their own resources, and saw no other possibilities. Isn't it also true for us? Sometimes it takes our getting to the place where we realize we have done all we can do before we even begin to look for divine intervention. Sometimes it is only when we feel helpless and hopeless that we even think about turning to God. Sometimes it is only when we see that we can't rely on ourselves and our abilities that we consider inviting God to help us out. The hour of our greatest need may come when we have been brought to the place where we have to admit we need God, because we can't do it all by ourselves.

The hour of our greatest need may also be when there is a great loss or tragedy in our lives. When we experience some earth-shattering event, some crisis that blows our whole world apart, we also may be forced to look Godward. Such was the case with Isaiah, for it was in the year that King Uzziah died that Isaiah saw the Lord.

It is significant and hardly surprising that Isaiah's call to the prophetic ministry came in the aftermath of King Uzziah's death. Uzziah had ruled the southern kingdom of Judah for approximately forty

years. Isaiah was born and grew to manhood during the years of Uzziah's reign. Isaiah had, in fact, never known another king.

The splendor of Uzziah's reign is described in detail in 1 Kings 15 and 2 Chronicles 27. These accounts tell how he modernized the army; conquered the territory of the Philistines, the age-old enemies of the Israelites; extended the nation's commercial activities into Arabia, reconstructed the copper and iron works at Elath, and took an enlightened interest in agriculture. There was a temporary power vacuum in that portion of the Mideast during this period, with the result that Judah under Uzziah's kingship experienced an era of prosperity and splendor unparalleled in the history of Israel, except perhaps during the reign of Solomon. It was Camelot, folks. Got the picture?

Since kingship is more or less alien to our experience, it is difficult for us to comprehend the significance of the king in ancient society. He was to the nation what the patriarch was to the clan. His presence inspired the people with a sense of strength and security. Their faith was in their king. We also tend to put our faith in penultimate rather than ultimate things, that is to say, we tend to trust in those things that we think will last but somehow don't [Kelly, "Isaiah," *Broadman Bible Commentary*, pp. 151 and 208-9].

Think about how Isaiah must have felt after his king died. The prophet was probably an upper-class resident of Jerusalem who grew up in the city. He seems to have known and had access to members of the royal court and most likely was educated there [Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, p. 271]. In other words, Isaiah was close to the king and his government. He was near to the heart of the country's

power base. He was an insider, part of the inner circle, the ruling elite. He was no stranger to the king and the world of politics. In fact his world *was* the king and the good life the king's programs and policies had made possible.

But the king died. Uzziah died, and his death signaled the end of the status quo, the end of the good times, the end of life as Isaiah had known it. What a shock that must have been to the prophet. It would have been like the world was coming to an end. After all, when kings reign for forty years and have the kind of unbridled success that Uzziah did, it would be easy enough to begin to think that he would never die, that things would never have to change. Camelot can last forever can't it?

No it can't, but when that reality breaks in on us, it is overwhelming. Where were you when John F. Kennedy was killed? If you are old enough to remember what it felt like to receive that news, that *our* president had been shot in *our* state and in *our* city, you may have a little bit of an appreciation for what Isaiah must have been feeling in the year that King Uzziah died.

Isaiah must have felt depressed, fearful, anxious. He must have felt insecure, threatened, abandoned, and vulnerable. He must have felt grief, a sense of loss, a sense of emptiness.

But in the year that Uzziah died, in that terrible year of monumental crisis for Isaiah, he saw the Lord. Hear his words again, as one writer paraphrases what the prophet experienced:

It was while in the throes of self-pity
and depression—

even while I was questioning God's concern
 for me and my world—
 that I was permitted a unique experience.
 I do know that I was struck, as if by lightning,
 with the frightening realization that God
 was near to me, that he was speaking to me—
 putting thoughts into my head
 that almost paralyzed me with fear.
 And it was at this moment—
 in the midst of this powerful Presence—
 that I sensed an overwhelming love, a recognition,
 an acceptance as a creature of God, forgiven,
 redeemed, beloved [Brandt, *Prophets/Now*, pp. 16-17].

It was in a crisis time, a time of tragedy and loss, a time of grief
 and despair, that Isaiah experienced the presence of God. Have you
 gone through such a time of crisis, a situation that has threatened to
 tear your world apart? Do you know what Isaiah was going through? If
 someone close to you has died you do. If you have lost your job you do.
 If you have gone through a divorce you do. If you have suffered a
 severe material loss you do. If you or someone you love has been
 diagnosed with a serious, perhaps terminal illness you do. If you have
 experienced separation from your children you do. If there has been a
 crisis of any kind in your life you do.

The historian Charles A. Beard once was asked what he had learned
 from his study of history. He responded with four proverbs, four pieces
 of wisdom. One of them was simply this: *When it is dark enough, you
 can see the stars.* You know this to be true. Only when it is dark
 enough can you see the stars. You can't see the stars when it is light.
 You can't see the stars when it is dusk. You can't even see the stars at
 night when you live in the city and are distracted by all the lesser lights

around you. You can only see the stars clearly and fully when you are in the dark.

Friends, it is the witness of scripture that life contains dark times. The dark times can be when we have come to the end of our rope or have exhausted all our resources or have run out of possibilities. The dark times can be those periods of great crisis or tragedy or loss. The Bible confirms our experience that life indeed has dark times in it.

But that is not all the Bible proclaims. It proclaims that even in those dark times, no especially in those dark times, no, perhaps *only* in those dark times, God can be seen most clearly to be there. Sometimes life's most negative experiences reveal the most positive realities. It's only when we get to the end of our rope that we realize that is where God lives. He lives at the end of our rope.

It's not that God waits for dark times to reveal himself most clearly. It is that only in the dark times do we tend to look for God with the eyes of faith, the only eyes we have when it is dark enough. The good news is that in the dark times when we look for God with the eyes of faith, God is indeed there. God is there—walking by the seashore with us as we go about our daily living or high and lifted up in the sanctuary with us as we worship him. God is there—offering us help and providing us hope. God is there—claiming us with his love and calling us to faith in him. God is there—leading us beyond the dark times and into the light.