

Isaiah 6:1-8 Pastor Bill Uetricht 5 Epiphany 2/10/19

On Friday at my spinning class at the Lakeshore Fitness Center I was powering through the climbs and sprints, not paying to the music very much, until I heard the Red Hot Chili Peppers sing: “Life is more than a read through.” Ooh, I thought. That’s good. A “read through” is what you do when you are learning a piece of music or beginning to work on a play. You read through it. You don’t necessarily have a lot of investment in it yet. You certainly don’t give it your all, nuance words or phrases. You just power through it so you can begin to get acquainted with it. The Chili Peppers say, though, that “life is *more than* a read through.” More than just going through the motions.

*More than. More than.* Those words are so significant for me in terms of defining the religious experience. To encounter God is to an encounter a “more than.”

I have this sense that for many people religion is some kind of escape hatch from reality. You know, there’s real life, and then there’s religion. Religion is what you want to do when you want to get away from real life. That’s the critique that many people offer of us religious folks. You religious people like to live in some kind of fantasy land. You just want to escape reality.

No, true religion is not about escaping real life. It is about seeing real life with different eyes. It is encountering the “more than” character about life. It’s not about not going fishing, but rather about casting your fishing nets into the *deeper* water. It is to see life as more than a read through.

When you read a passage like that which comes from Isaiah today you have this sense that religion takes you to some other kind of reality, something that you aren’t familiar with at all. After all, being taken to a high and lofty place where these flying snake-like figures (seraphim), who use their six wings to cover their eyes and their genitals, and for flying—that really is quite weird. I don’t hang out in those kinds of environments. You might, but I sure don’t.

Isaiah's intention, though, is not to provide an escape hatch from reality. He is sending us to the lofty and weird place so that we can see the remarkable character of his call to be a prophet. Today's reading is Isaiah's call story. And we are told that it happened at a particular point in real historical time. It occurred in the year that King Uzziah died, somewhere around 740 B.C.E. It's a time that Isaiah's audience would recognize. Uzziah was appreciated. His death would have been thought as a national tragedy. "In the year that King Uzziah died" would be like our saying, "In the year that President Kennedy died" or "in the year of 9-11." It was a *real* time, a time of *real* national struggle.

It was during that time that Isaiah heard the call to become a prophet. And Isaiah experienced this call as amazing. It was a *more than* experience. It wasn't just a call from his own brain, his own opinions, his own feelings. Something else had gotten ahold of his life, something *more*. After all, life is *more* than a read-through. There is something a lot deeper going on. And to get that, to communicate that, sometimes you have to draw a big picture, speak of wild and weird experiences. To communicate the *more than* character of life, sometimes you have to talk about seraphim who are flying around, calling to one another, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts." And then you have to note how the pivots of the temple are shaking, and the sanctuary is being filled with smoke. The call of God and ordinary real life are penetrated by something remarkably large and mysterious.

I have this remarkable group of young people in my third-year confirmation class. They are amazingly bright. This past week we were talking about atheism, primarily because it is becoming quite popular, especially in certain settings in this culture. Since they are so bright, I decided to give them *more than* they probably have ever been exposed to.

We started talking about what we mean when we say "God." I said that atheists often think that when we people of faith say "God" we are referring to a being (a big being) who lives somewhere beyond the universe. I said that it is only one way of talking about God. For me,

God is not a being *outside* of the universe, but rather a reality, a force, and an energy that is experienced in every aspect of the universe. After I said that, one of the bright young men in the group said, “So then, God cannot be separated from everything that is because God has left his mark on everything that is.”

Wow! That’s it. Every aspect of living is penetrated by the experience of God. Every aspect of ordinary life is filled with the extraordinary presence of God! The author of Isaiah puts it this way: “the whole earth is full of God’s glory.” There is a *more than* character to life, every aspect of it. The experience of God is not an experience of a being some place far away, but rather an experience of the extraordinary character of life itself. Everyday life is full of the glory of God. Everyday life is penetrated by mystery, by that which leads you to wonder, that which causes your jaw to drop.

I remember when my son Micah was born. Wow! That was wild. Again, I know I was on the easy side of this experience, but still, wow! “How did this all happen?” you ask yourself. And then all of a sudden you are holding a baby in your arms. He’s breathing. He’s yours. It is as if you cast your nets into the deep sea and you now are bringing into the shore a massive catch of fish. Life is extraordinarily abundant. It’s as if water used for ordinary religious rites all of a sudden turns into 180 gallons of wine. Life is amazingly lavish. Grace is the overwhelming truth about life.

But oh yes, that baby is now *yours*. You are responsible for him. Wow! I am feeling a little nervous, more than a little inadequate. This is *my* job? “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips. And let’s face it, I live among a people of unclean lips. I am messed up, and so is everybody else.” I fall on my knees in the presence of God and say, “Get away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

This extraordinary character of life is amazingly wonderful, but sometimes I don’t feel that I am up to the task. Let’s face it. I’ve made lots of mistakes before, and they generally only had to do with me. Now, I am responsible for somebody else. As a father, I really don’t

know what I am doing. And then, called to serve God? Whoa! That's beyond my ability.

Oh, this is not about low self-esteem or false modesty. This is not about cutting yourself down, making other people think that you are not worth much. That kind of neediness is not what the experience of God is. The experience of God brings you into an awareness of your own smallness in light of God and in light of the call.

To my confirmation class the other night I said, "You might think of yourself as pretty special. But in light of the world, you are pretty small." Well, one of the boys, amplifying my point said, "You know, we are pretty small in light of the rest of the world. We're *tiny* in light of the galaxy. We're really *puny* in light of the universe."

Yes, we are, which is why true humility is the right posture in light of the experience of God. We are puny. And we are people of unclean lips. We do say with Simon, "Get away from me, God, for we are sinful people." The extraordinary character of life, the amazing abundance of life brings us to our knees, makes us aware of our limitations, even causes us to confess our sin.

But still, even in the midst of our brokenness, even in the midst of our smallness, our inadequacy, we experience the call being extended. God doesn't stop with our messed-upness. He takes a burning coal to our lips, and says, now you are clean. Life is overwhelmingly gracious; God is the author of abundance. We, puny and broken as we are, hear the voice, "Whom shall we send?" We hear the invitation, "Follow me!"

Inadequate, unworthy, puny people experience the call to become more, to be *more than* we have been or are. The *More Than* invites us to be *more than*. We feel it in our bones. We experience it in the depths of our souls. We know that we cannot be comfortable to stay where we are. The voice of the *More Than* is loud and clear. There are new places for you to go to. There is a new politics for you to discover. There is a deeper sea into which you are to cast your faith nets. There are new people for you to meet, new opportunities for you to take hold of, new responsibilities for you to embrace.

A voice is calling. And eventually we realize that the voice that is calling is the voice of Jesus, the one who called Simon and who really comprehends the voice of the *More Than*. This voice will not let you sit still. This voice—the voice of abundance and grace—will move you forward and probably unsettle you.

The call of God on your life will not be easy. For you, life will not simply be a read-through. When the voice of the More Than speaks, life will be about going fishing in the deeper waters. And the deeper waters sometimes will look like a cross. To hear the voice that is the real deal is not always to be taken to Easy Street.

Remember this, though, the experience of the More Than is ultimately an experience of abundance, of life. The crabby people tried to do away with Jesus, but God raised him from the dead. To experience the More Than is ultimately to be brought into resurrection, new life.

I'm hearing this voice calling you and me: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for me?" What else can we say but, "Here I am, Lord; send mw?"