

Vision Quest (Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17)

In his sermon last week, Zach mentioned how he had experienced the Holy Spirit while attending a mission trip on a Native American reservation. That got me thinking about the spirituality of our Native American brothers and sisters. In particular, I got to thinking about the vision quest. "In many Native American groups...When an older child is ready, he or she will go on a personal, spiritual quest alone in the wilderness, often in conjunction with a period of fasting. This usually lasts for a number of days while the child is attuned to the spirit world...the child's life direction will appear at some point. The child returns to the tribe, and...will pursue that direction in life."¹

Our Older Testament scripture for today describes a similar experience of the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah wasn't an older child at the time, but he was at a crossroads in his life. Isaiah lived in the southern kingdom of Judah in the 8th century before Jesus during the reign of the King Uzziah.

According to the Bible, Uzziah was the "king of Judah for 52 years (c. 791-739 BC). Assyrian records indicate that Uzziah reigned for 42 years (c. 783-742). His reign marked the height of Judah's power. He fought successfully against other nations and exacted tribute from the Ammonites. Judah expanded westward with settlements in Philistia. During the period of Uzziah's reign, the nation prospered, and desert areas were reclaimed by water conservation. Jerusalem's walls were reconstructed, towers were added, and engines of war were mounted at strategic points. A large army was also maintained. The nation's prosperity under Uzziah was considered to have been a result of the king's fidelity to Yahweh. (But, unfortunately, for him and the nation) According to the biblical record, Uzziah's strength caused him to become proud, which led to his destruction. He attempted to burn incense in the Temple, an act restricted to priests. When the priests attempted to send him from the Temple, the king became angry and was immediately stricken with leprosy. His son Jotham ruled for his father until Uzziah died."²

¹ Wikipedia, "Vision Quest" A

² Britannica Online Encyclopedia; britannica.com

No wonder the scripture makes reference to the fact that it was in the year that Uzziah died that Isaiah had his vision of God. Not only Isaiah, but his entire nation was at a crossroads. The Judeans felt as many Americans did when Franklin Roosevelt died...or when John Kennedy died. Or as many of us feel when our mother or our father dies. They anxiously wondered, What will happen now? Suddenly the future was an unknown. Isaiah and his people found themselves apprehensive, frightened, adrift without an anchor.

Thus, at this crossroads of his life, Isaiah went on a vision quest, and the best place he knew to search for a vision of God was in the house of God. Isaiah went to the Temple, and, sure enough, in the House of God, Isaiah had a vision of God.

In the vision, Isaiah was reminded that while King Uzziah had died, the true king, the pure king, was still alive. Isaiah saw Yahweh, God, sitting upon his throne, surrounded by extraordinary winged creatures called the seraphim. With two of their wings, they covered their faces, so that they wouldn't be blinded by the bright holiness of God. With two other wings, they covered their nakedness; and with their last two wings, these angelic creatures rushed to do what God called them to do. And all the while, they sang praise to God: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

This vision of the holy God was overwhelming for Isaiah, for in the presence of the holy God, Isaiah was suddenly painfully aware of his own ungodliness and the ungodliness of his nation. Isaiah knew that he was not worthy to be in the presence of God. Why would God want anything to do with him? Why would God want anyone like him to serve him? Thus Isaiah exclaimed, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people, of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Isaiah knew that there was no way that he could save himself.

But God didn't want to leave Isaiah in his misery. And now that Isaiah saw himself properly in relationship with the holy God, God wouldn't leave Isaiah in his misery. As Martin Luther put it, "It is God's nature to create out of nothing. Unless you are nothing, God cannot make anything out of you."

Once Isaiah realized that he was next to nothing in comparison to God, God could do something for him and with him. Thus, right after Isaiah confessed his sinfulness, God sent one of the seraphim to him with a live coal from the altar of sacrifice. And the winged creature said, as he touched Isaiah's mouth with the coal, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

What a moment! Isaiah knew that his perfect, awesome God was focused on him, present with him, cared about him. God had saved him, cleansed him. And then Isaiah heard God's voice, asking, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

Aware of the presence and the power of God as he had never been before, having heard God speak to him as he never had before, and keenly aware of the love and concern of God for his creatures and for his world, Isaiah found the strength and the courage to answer, "Here am I; send me!" He was no longer afraid and confused. He knew that he needed to live his life listening to God and doing what God wanted him to do. He knew that God would not ask of him the impossible. He knew that God would give him the insight and the strength and the words to do what God wanted him to do.

I believe that Isaiah's vision of God is in our Bibles so that we can claim Isaiah's vision of God as our own. God knows that we live in a difficult time too. He knows that we too stand at a crossroads, in need of a vision.

Besides our personal day-to-day struggles, we struggle under the burden of the current economy. And we're constantly aware of the possibility of terrorism and nuclear disaster. Furthermore, we're Christians who find ourselves more and more in an unchristian environment, facing a crisis of identity. Who are we? Whose are we? How are we to live our lives? What is God calling us to do?

Isaiah's vision is a vision that can help us answer such questions. It's a vision that can help us find direction in our lives. It's a vision that can give our lives meaning and purpose and stability. And how much better our lives will be if we keep this vision of the holy, caring God in front of us!

God is alive. He's the holiest, the purest, the best that is. Before him, everything else pales. As the early church father Augustine was walking along the seashore one day, he was thinking about the doctrine of the Trinity. He was trying to understand how God could be Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Suddenly, Augustine heard God's voice telling him, "Pick up one of the large sea shells there by the shore." So Augustine picked up a shell. Then the voice said, "Now, pour the ocean into the shell." Augustine answered, "Lord, I can't do that." And the voice answered, "Of course not. In the same way, how can your small, finite mind ever hold and understand the mystery of the eternal, infinite, triune God?"

Nonetheless, this holy God, the mighty king of the universe, wants to reach out and touch our lives. He sees us with all of our imperfections and loves us and forgives us and cleanses us and saves us in spite of ourselves.

Our proper response is to live our lives in awe of God, as did the little boy, obviously from Connecticut, whose parents overheard him one night repeating what he thought were the words of the Lord's Prayer. He prayed, "Our Father, who art in New Haven, how do you know my name?" We're to marvel, as H. G. Wells did, when he said, "I cannot believe that whoever is up there would reach down and shake hands with me." But God does. And he not only wants to shake hands with us, God wants to reveal himself to us, interact with us, help us, work with us. Thus our proper response is not only awe but also confession, cleansing, and acceptance of the work he would have us do.

And let there be no doubt. God calls each one of us. He wants each one of us to answer the call he places on our lives. We may feel ill prepared, ill equipped, too imperfect, too sinful, ah, but the miracles God will accomplish anyhow--in and through us--if we will just put ourselves in his hands and answer, "Here am I. Send me."

Once when he was to preach at the University of Sydney in Australia, John Stott lost his voice. He later said, "What can you do with a missionary who has no voice? We had come to the last night of the [evangelistic campaign]. The students had booked the big university hall. A group of students

gathered around me, and I asked them to pray as Paul did, that this thorn in the flesh might be taken from me. But we went on to pray that if it pleased God to keep me in weakness, I would rejoice in my infirmities in order that the power of Christ might rest upon me. As it turned out, I had to get within one inch of the microphone just to croak the gospel. I was unable to use any inflection of voice to express my personality. It was just a croak in a monotone, and all the time we were crying to God that his power would be demonstrated in human weakness. Well, I can honestly say that there was a far greater response that night than any other night. I've been back to Australia ten times now, and on every occasion somebody has come up to me and said, 'Do you remember that night when you lost your voice? I was converted that night.'"³

Several years ago, *Life Magazine* published an issue on God. On the front cover was the huge question: "When You Think of God, What Do You See?" After today's vision quest, may we have a vivid picture in our minds and in our hearts of God--his holiness; his love for us; his redemption of us; and his call to us. And may this vision be our anchor in difficult and uncertain times. Furthermore, may it be this vision that gives us the courage, the strength, the direction, and the determination so that the way we keep God's vision before us and the way we live our lives shouts to our holy and loving God, "Here am I. Send me!" Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; June 7, 2009

³ Sermonsplus.co.uk