

God's Flowing and Our Ebbing

Isaiah 6:1-13

I have spent several enjoyable vacations on the Atlantic Ocean, both at Cape Cod and along the coast of Maine. I have always enjoyed the beaches. One perennial pastime is watching children build sandcastles. They all seem to build them close to the sea's edge. With tidal changes, the parameters of the ebbing and flowing would be altered, often allowing the ocean to become increasingly bold in assailing what the children had so carefully created.

There are corresponding patterns in human life. It could be said that in sleeping we ebb and upon rising, flow. Or in conversation between two people, one becomes quiet (ebbs) so that the other can talk (flow). This celebrated sixth chapter of Isaiah is likewise about ebbing and flowing. At the outset, it is about God flowing and Isaiah ebbing; then later, it is about Isaiah flowing again as he never had before. The powerful phrasing of this account offers insight relative to the central issue in this religious encounter.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up ... (Isaiah 6:1) That's God flowing. Occasionally, someone will give us a photographic representation of one thing or another, designed in such a way that initially we may have a difficult time discerning anything but shadings and blobs of light and darkness. But if we are persistent, and perhaps turn the photograph around and look at it from different perspectives, eventually we spot what has been there all along. Until that time, however, we find ourselves distracted by seemingly meaningless configurations.

This happens religiously, too. In fact, with great regularity the church becomes sidetracked by what is peripheral and inconsequential, and dupes itself right out of that fundamental encounter that is the prime motivating factor of all that we do in the church. Worship is a good case in point. For worship to be all it can be for people, there are certain ancillary factors which, when they are firmly in place, can be most helpful. Good ushering, comfortable temperatures, readable orders of worship, organ, and choral responses these are all wonderful aids to worship. But often we get sidetracked by such issues. We center on what ultimately doesn't matter and fail to be transported into the presence of God.

Worship does not need to be an impeccable production for us to see God. When it is with all our hearts that we truly seek God, God will come even if something is not in place. This is to say that in worship there needs to be a straining and a stretching beyond the liturgical movements; because in so doing, we begin to posture ourselves to be grasped by the spirit of the living God. It is not, mind you, the God we have created through the juxtaposing of liturgical designs, but the God who is always there waiting to meet God's people.

And Isaiah reminds us that God will not be domesticated by us. There is an "awfulness" and an unfathomable mystery about God.

"I saw the Lord ..." Beyond all else, that's what people should declare when they leave this sanctuary.

And I said. "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell amid a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5) That's Isaiah ebbing.

When people have a sense for the splendor and majesty of God, it leads them not to flex their muscles, but to bow their knees.

Please understand that what Isaiah confesses does not fly in the face of our efforts to make people feel fundamentally good about themselves. "Woe is me" is not about undermining self-esteem and making people go around feeling terrible about themselves. Instead, it has to do with feelings that inevitably follow when we find our very real human warts and all juxtaposed to the holiness of God. It is to existentially understand the rhetorical question of the psalmist, "If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3)

Isaiah is describing the immense difference between our humanity and God's holiness. Moments of that nature remind us that we are creaturely and derived. Far from mocking us, they recall for us whose we are.

But in this difference, we are not left to falter and grovel. “And he touched my mouth and said. “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.”(Isaiah 6:7) One of the attending creatures Isaiah saw in his vision takes a piece of charcoal from the incense altar of the temple, touches Isaiah’s lips and removes his guilt.

We don’t always know what to make of seraphim, burning coals and the like, but the crucial point is that Isaiah is touched by God through this attending creature, and experiences forgiveness. This burning coal becomes, as it were, the kiss of God, and Isaiah is redeemed.

If we could in some way weigh the guilt brought into our sanctuary sabbath by sabbath, how heavy would it all be? A few pounds? Twenty pounds? A staggering number of pounds? I tend to think in terms of the latter. It would be a significant weight. Most of us come to the present shackled with more than our share of guilt for what has or has not happened in the past. It can be guilt about what we have done or failed to do, about feelings we have had (and perhaps still do) but feel we shouldn’t. Maybe it is guilt about thoughts we have had.

The good news from Isaiah is that God is waiting to send a seraphim in our direction, carrying a burning coal, to burn our guilt away. And, just maybe, the difficulty we have in feeling grace and forgiveness has more to do with our unwillingness to accept them than with God not bestowing them.

Has the seraphim of God drawn near to you and me, carrying the burning coal of forgiveness, only to find our hands defensively outstretched, desirous of keeping that distance from God that insures our continuing misery? Are we ebbing when God would have us flow?

Hence the resolution of it all for Isaiah:

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.” (Isaiah 6:8) What an amazing sequence of events! Brought into the blazing and incomprehensible presence of God, painfully aware of our finitude and transitoriness in the presence of the Eternal, forgiven and now commissioned invited to flow.

In Isaiah’s commissioning we are reminded, God is not looking for superstars and flawless people (even if they were available!). God is perfectly able to take our brokenness, our faith and lack of faith, our energy and lack of energy, and use us for kingdom purposes. It is nothing short of the bedrock rhythm of the Christian faith. We celebrate it every time we worship, even if we don’t fully understand or comprehend it. God can take very ordinary, unsung, and fallen people like you and me and utilize our lives as the vessels of God’s grace. The psalmist very neatly ties together what this commissioning of Isaiah declares: “... a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” (Psalm 51:17)

At the point of our deepest ebbing, God turns the tide, reclaims us, and invites us to flow toward and for the Kingdom.