

Sermons from Park Hill: August 17, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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Isaiah 6: 1-8

John 3: 17

“Once the ‘Me’ Is Out of the Way”

Listen to John 3: 17 again, from a different version -*The Message*: “God didn't go to all the trouble of sending God's Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. The Son came to help, to put the world right again.”

And then listen to verse 5 from Isaiah 6 again, from two different translations. We read “Woe is me. I am lost.” The King James says “Woe is me. I am undone.” And the New International Version says “Woe to me. I am ruined!” Three different words evoking three very different meanings. When I hear “I am lost,” I almost automatically start singing Amazing Grace: “I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but

now I see.” But, when he encountered God, the prophet Isaiah wasn't lost. And he wasn't blind – he could see clearly. And that's what scared the heck out of him.

What kind of experience had he had if his response to seeing God was “I am ruined?” Not, “I am blessed,” or “I'm so lucky...” But it's not the three different words that matter so much but the first word of each phrase: “I.” An experience of God requires us to surrender our ego. My ego must give way because I am not the center of the universe. God is. And therefore, “I am ruined.” An experience of God changes us and I am undone. I am not so much lost as I am liberated from myself. It makes us care more for our world and less about our own small place in it. It's no longer about “me.” And once the “me” is out of the way, watch out what “we” can do.

That ‘we’ is our unity with God and consequently, our unity with each other and all creation. Knowing that unity, that oneness with all creation, is a transcendent experience – it transcends our own limitations. We transcend the limits of our own bodies and minds. We go beyond our own desires. Some people try drugs and alcohol to transcend their problems. Some people use sex to find unity with another person, and another person. Actual unity that transcends our limitations is powerful and rare. It is also frightening, because it requires us to surrender our will. I am ruined – and rebuilt as we.

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I see two things in this text from Isaiah: How powerful and frightening an experience of God is. Frightening because it may cause the very foundations upon which we have built our life to tremble. Frightening because it may reveal to us a calling we have been trying to avoid.

Frightening because anything that causes us to change takes us into foreign territory, crossing our carefully built borders. But, an experience of God is also so powerful we will have the power and ability to accomplish audacious, impossible things – not things that I want, but what God desires. Focusing on what I want – my way – will often be frustrating. Why don't people get that I am right!? But, once the 'me' is out of the way, watch out what 'we' can do.

There are two major ways we think of God: Immanent and transcendent. To speak of God's immanence is to recognize the closeness of God, the God within, God who is as close as my breathing. God is like a caring friend, who holds us when we fall, comforts the mourning, binds up the brokenhearted. This is clearly true. In fact, one of the ways we know this is that God in the human form of Jesus came to walk among us, not stand above us. Again, as John 3: 17 says, "God didn't go to all the trouble of sending God's son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. The Son came to help, to put the world right again." Came to help us, to put the world right again. It's for the world. Remembering that famous verse, John 3:16, when someone says, "I am saved," it's not something to brag about. It should say I have surrendered my ego for unity with God's hopes and desires for creation. God, whose concern is the needs of the world, not my personal gain.

As one writer said, one contemporary problem is that we make God small. God is a heavenly butler – "would you get that for me, please" – or a great hotel concierge who can get us tickets even for the best sold-out show – an impossible feat. In America today, God is seen as marching in step with a political party or the same as our national interests. Then listen to some TV preachers. God desires our prosperity and – in the words of the Prayer of Jabez – "the enlargement of our territories." Remember the craze about the Prayer of Jabez just a few years ago? There were all kinds of little books and journals and key chains and other things marketed to Christians. The Prayer of Jabez, stripped from some obscure passage in Kings, claims that God's great desire is for us to have more. We just need to pray for more of whatever we want. The Bible is meant to help us fulfill our selfish desires! No wonder it was a best seller. Who doesn't like that! We might know that is absurd, but wouldn't you like to think it's just a little bit true?!

But other ways we make God small is to focus only on God as a calming presence, a supportive friend, and a healing helper. One writer suggested all of that is simply a way to maintain the status quo. Isn't that an interesting idea? Keeping God small helps keep things we want them to be. Manageable. I was really struck by that and wondered if some of my prayers are really about keeping things the same – focused on myself.

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Saint Augustine was walking along the beach one day, puzzling over the complicated doctrine of the Trinity. He almost stumbled over a young boy with a bucket. The boy was running back and forth to pour water into a little hole the boy had dug in the sand.

Augustine asked, "What are you doing?" The boy said, "I'm trying to put the ocean into this hole."

Augustine laughed and realized that he had been trying to put an infinite God into his finite mind. He was trying to understand the hugeness of God in his little mind. In order to do that, we sometimes make God too small, or small enough that we can make God what we can understand. But the ocean will not fit in a hole we dig, and complete understanding of God will not fit into our mind. My ego must make way for all of us.

Therefore, the second major way of understanding God is to identify the transcendence of God. To say God is immanent is to recognize how close God is to us – that God is not some unmovable being in the sky, a deity that started creation and has keeps his hands off. But to say God is transcendent is to recognize how big God is, how beyond our human understanding God is. God is wholly other. Both are equally true. I like the line in one of our communion prayers: "God is as close as our breathing, and as distant as the farthest star." A transcendent experience takes us out of ourselves, helps us connect with the vastness of the cosmos. A transcendent experience gets us

out of our heads. And once the 'me' is out of the way, watch out what 'we' can do.

Isaiah must have thought he was going out of his mind. He saw God sitting on a huge throne, robes so big that the entire temple floor is covered. It says he *saw* God. Remember, at this time it was believed that to see God would kill you. Literally. And to remind us of this, the seraphs flying around had two of their six wings covering their eyes. It was an amazing sight, but it filled Isaiah with a sense of dread. He was being tapped to tell Israel how far out of God's will they had strayed. They weren't caring for the widows and orphans. They weren't acting with justice. They weren't walking humbly with God. They cared more for their own comfort than for each others needs. They oppressed the foreigners in their midst. A succession of prophets began to try to tell Israel they must change but they were laughed at, put in prison for upsetting their comfortable leaders... But how the mighty began to fall. Isaiah tried to give a vision of justice, but the empire fell, and hard.

He might not have wanted it, but Isaiah must surrender to a new calling. Isaiah saw God – my eyes have seen the king; and Isaiah saw himself – woe to me. I am ruined. I am unclean. But that was not an excuse. And maybe he thought that by saying "I am unclean," God would move on and choose someone else. Whatever he thought of himself though, he was cleansed, purified. His sin, whatever it was that he thought could exempt him from service, was blotted out. He received forgiveness. But, the experience didn't

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end there – “blissful peace like a river.” In this case, forgiveness prepared him for service. Forgiveness wasn’t just so he could feel better about himself. Forgiveness was about getting rid of any barrier that could be used as an excuse. The focus on “me” was gone.

If you were to have an overwhelming experience of God – God as close as our breathing or God so big it transcends our human minds capacity to comprehend the vast cosmos – what would you do with it? We might say we are blessed. Would you ever think of being frightened by it? Because my ego must be set aside?

What do you want for your life? Or what does God hope for your life? What do you want this church to do for you? Or what does God desire for us? Once the “me” is out of the way, watch out what “we” can do. The spiritual life is continually about setting aside our own wants for the sake of the whole, listening with different ears, seeing what others ignore, upsetting the status quo. Buddhists teach that our attachment to things is basic to the problem of complete peace. And some people proclaim peace, peace, where there is no peace – or justice.

Who needs you? What excuse do you have? Must your ego first give way, surrender, to a larger vision than yourself? Christianity is not about getting more, it’s about giving more. That might be frightening. But that is also what makes it so powerful.

Where have you been insistent on your own way recently? Has that really served the greater good or your own ego?