

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

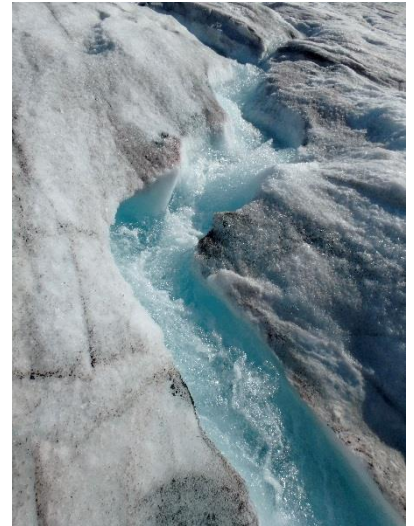
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## **Holy, Holy, Holy**

I said: ‘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!’ ... Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’  
– Isaiah 6:1-8

Last August, I spent three days hiking on the Peyto Glacier in Banff National Park. I have never spent any significant amount of time on a glacier before, and it was a pretty amazing experience. In late summer, the snow had all melted off, and we were walking on blue-tinted ice shaped by the cycle of freeze and thaw, sprinkled with ground rock. All around, there was a musical tinkling of meltwater dripping, drops accumulating into rivulets, rivulets joining into small streams, streams into torrents, which might disappear suddenly down vertical shafts of unfathomable depth. Where the glacier flowed over convex rock shapes deep below, the surface of the ice was pulled



apart, creating enormous crevasses hundreds of meters long, wide enough to swallow several hikers at a gulp, deep enough that such unfortunate hikers might never be seen again. Fortunately, at that time of year, in the brilliant sun, the crevasses were easy to spot and avoid. But even so, we each wore a harness and roped ourselves together in case someone fell in. Glaciers are unforgiving of the careless.



At one point, on the last day, as we hiked over the ice-filled pass that connects the Peyto Glacier to the Bow Glacier, the skies darkened. We picked up the pace, as we did not want to get caught on the glacier in a storm. Wind, rain and snow would have reduced visibility to a few feet, covered the crevasses, made navigation difficult, and even made it hard to find our way off the glacier (there are only a few points where the ice meets rock gently enough to allow for an easy exit). A storm could have turned a wonderful hike into a struggle for survival itself.





Hiking the glacier made me feel small, insignificant even, in the presence of such grandeur, such majesty, such casual threat. The fact that the glacier is shrinking rapidly, and may not long outlast me, did not detract from its radiance, but added to it. The knowledge that something is temporary sometimes forces us to cherish it more.

Beauty, wonder, awe, a sense of the holiness and preciousness of life, these are life-giving to me, and I find that without them, without a sense of the radiance of creation, my spirit shrivels. When I do experience them, I feel my heart fill; I feel my soul expand; I feel connected to beauty and joy and life.

Such experiences are not that unusual. There is even a word, the word “numinous,” to describe them. In a famous book, *The Experience of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto described them as a sense of “mysterium tremendum,” a tremendous mystery, a terrifying yet fascinating encounter with something utterly beyond our comprehension.

Those experiences, and others like them, are the closest I have ever come to the kind of experience that Isaiah had in the temple, an experience of the utter majesty, the utter holiness of God. The root meaning of *holy* is that of something “separate, other and distinct,” and the encounter with a holy God is the encounter with a being who is utterly distinct from us, radically other, completely beyond our knowing, terrible in his beauty, horrifying in her power.

Isaiah had this vision, the story goes, in the year that King Uzziah died, which was 740 B.C.E. King Uzziah had reigned for more than forty years, during a particularly prosperous and secure period of the history of the kingdom of Judah. In fact, the reign of King Uzziah was considered second only to the reign of King Solomon in terms of its splendor. Uzziah’s death was the end of an era, and it is perhaps natural that the end of such an era would cause some anxiety and foreboding as people wondered how their lives would change. That anxiety might well have been enhanced by the growing menace of the rising empire of Assyria, which hung over Judah like a brooding vulture.

It was in that anxious year that Isaiah sees his inaugural vision and experiences his call to be a prophet. As the prophet grieves the loss of the old king, he has a vision of the true king of Israel, more powerful and more terrible than any earthly king, seated on a throne, majestic and glorious, with the train of his robe filling the temple.

But there is more! This mighty king is attended by fiery seraphs – creatures that sound like dragons - with three sets of wings, more powerful and more terrible than any earthly armies, even the Assyrian one. Think Game of Thrones dragons here, bigger than

elephants and mightier than whales. The creatures sing of God's holiness and their voices shake the foundations of the temple and fill it with smoke. Words are inadequate to describe this vision, as they are always inadequate to describe the holy. It is as if the prophet's anxiety is being refocused: "You're worried about puny king Uzziah, about insignificant Assyria? They are but bugs beneath my feet. Pay attention to the One who really matters!"

Isaiah's response to his vision is to feel very deeply his own insignificance in relation to this King. "Woe is me, for I am lost." The word "lost" could mean that Isaiah is reduced to silence or fears being destroyed. He finds the experience utterly overwhelming, overpowering, evading description or control, threatening to reduce him to nothing. "I am a man of unclean lips," he goes on to say, "and I live among a people of unclean lips." The word "unclean" does not mean moral failure, but dirt, as if the prophet has stumbled into a highly formal occasion after mucking out a pigsty. He feels out of place, unprepared, inadequate for the encounter.

Richard Adams, author of the book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and other strange delights, imagined the ultimate instrument of torture as a device that does nothing more than reveal reality to people. Adams says that most of the time we all live with the illusion that we are at the centre of our own universe. But this device reveals the vast reality of the universe: billions of years of time and trillions of light-years across and how insignificant we are in relationship to it. In Adams' bizarre imagination, people who are exposed to this fiendish device are inevitably driven stark raving mad, because it is only by living as if they are the centre of the universe that they can maintain any sense of sanity. When they are forced to confront the real nature of the universe, however, a universe in which they are such an insignificant part, they can't handle it, and they go off the deep end.

This sense of the vastness and tremendous mystery of being is exactly what is experienced by Isaiah and others who receive God's call, but they are not driven insane by it; quite the opposite - they realize that to live life as if they WERE the centre of the universe is insane. And yet they realize that is exactly what we all do. We live with the insane presumption that our insignificant lives are really all that matters. It is that presumption that makes us feel unclean in the presence of God. And when Isaiah realizes just how insane that way of living is, he does the only thing that he can really do, he takes himself out of the centre and puts God there.

The fact that he is able to even begin to grasp what it means to put God at the centre illustrates the other side of the holiness of God. For the story combines the terrifying

awareness of God's power and holiness with the good news that God is friendly, that we matter, that God in his holiness is involved in our lives and seeks partnership with us. One of the majestic fiery dragons is sent by the even more majestic King to purify Isaiah's unclean lips with a live coal. And then there is the question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" To that question, Isaiah responds the only way he can, "Here am I, God, send me."

It is this friendliness of God which is the essence of the good news, the gospel. For Scripture asserts that this utterly terrifying God, as vast and incomprehensible as the universe itself, enters into our reality and makes friends with us, that God speaks in the midst of our anxieties and calls forth people who can restore us to sanity. And so it is that the apostle Paul can say, in an inspired moment, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world. This is what we mean when we speak of God in three persons, as a Trinity. We speak of God entering into history in Christ. We speak of God as entering into our experience, our community when we speak of the Spirit. But prior to both of these ideas of God, we affirm that God is other, distinct, separate, beyond. The genius of the language of the Trinity is that it holds together God's holiness and God's friendliness, God's remoteness and God's nearness, God's incomprehensibility and God's self-revelation. God is paradox, one and yet three, three and yet one, near and yet far, far and yet near.

In response to this holy God, this paradoxical God, who is in all things, and yet beyond all things, we are called to bring our deepest identity into engagement with the crucial realities of our time. As Fred Buechner once put it, God's call is to find that place where our deep joy meets the world's deep hunger. The story of Isaiah's call is not just the story of God calling one man long ago. It is the call to each of us, to take ourselves out of the centre of our lives and put God there, to let God's holiness transform us into servants of God's will, to find the place where our joy meets the world's need. In our most anxious times, it is so tempting to think of ourselves as the centre of the universe, to think of our problems as overwhelming, our troubles as overpowering. Isaiah's vision resets our mental computers, so that we can see ourselves in proportion and to recognize that the only sane way to live is in service to this God whose own deep joy is to touch the world's deep need.

One closing story: it happened at a meeting of Maritime Conference of the United Church back in 1980. There are usually several hundred people at these meetings and it was lunchtime so the room was filled with conversation, until the assembly was startled into silence by a strange figure who climbed onto a table. He wasn't much older than a kid, really, curly hair, freckles, a white T-shirt, red shorts, and most strikingly, an artificial

leg. It was that leg which stunned the gabby church leaders into silence. They had no idea who he was, but once he had their attention, he began to tell them of his call. He was running across Canada, a marathon every day, to raise money to help find a cure for cancer. “Marathon of Hope,” he was calling it. They were skeptical, looking at that leg. He didn’t look like he could run around the block, let alone run across the continent. A kid, with one leg and a ridiculous dream. They had never heard of him before, but he told them he was a United Church kid from a small town in B.C., and he was running across Canada on one leg. You know who I am talking about, but he was right at the start of his journey and they had never heard of him before. Perhaps they didn’t think much of him, standing on that table that spring day. But in the days that followed, they kept hearing about him, as he ran across the Maritimes and started attracting the attention of the curious. The radio and newspapers started reporting his quest. Perhaps his dream seemed a little less ridiculous as he ran along the St. Lawrence through Quebec. Perhaps they began to experience the tingle of the numinous at the back of the neck as he slogged past the first of the Great Lakes and crossed Southern Ontario, attracting attention and donations as he went. And as he ran up along Georgian Bay and along the lonely highways of northern Ontario, I’m betting that they began to get that sense of wonder that you get when you realize you are a witness to a divine call.



You know of whom I’m speaking. You also know that he didn’t make it. Today, there is a monument at the spot on the north Shore of Lake Superior where he tearfully announced to a tearful nation, that he had to stop his run because his cancer had returned. He didn’t make it, or did he? I guess it depends on what you think “making it” means. “Terry Fox taught us that life is a victory, but you don’t always win,” writes former moderator Peter Short, who was there when Terry climbed on the table at the United Church meeting. When the ugly threat of cancer loomed over Terry’s life, the holy God loomed yet larger and put his fears in perspective. And it was then that Terry heard a call from the holy God saying, “whom shall I send, and who will go for me?” And in response, Terry said, “here I am, send me!”