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Isaiah 6:1-8

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“Here I am! Send me!”

Soren Kierkegaard tells a parable of a community of ducks waddling off to duck church to hear the duck preacher. The duck preacher spoke eloquently of how God had given the ducks wings with which to fly. With these wings there was nowhere the ducks could not go; there was no God-given task the ducks could not accomplish. With these wings they could soar into the presence of God. Shouts of "Amen" were quacked throughout the duck congregation. At the conclusion of the service, the ducks and the duck preacher left, commenting on what a wonderful worship experience they had had -- and they all waddled back home. (Adapted from *Homiletics*. Feb 8, 1998)

The story of Isaiah's call, that moment when he was called by God to be a prophet, is familiar to many, if only because of his great response, "Send me!" In this instance when God broke through time and space to touch one human being, it happened to be during a worship service, instilling in Isaiah a vision of God with seraphs flying overhead. Because it was forbidden in Ancient Israel to look upon God, Isaiah's immediate response was a great lament, "Woe to me! I am ruined!" he said. No one saw God directly and lived, so he assumed his time was up. And, in a sense, it was. Hearing Isaiah's lamenting wail, one of the seraphs flies to him and touches his lips with a burning coal. Not as a punishment, but to symbolize the purification of his word and the sanctifying of his mission. It was a sort of baptismal ritual. Hearing the Lord ask, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Isaiah, full of gratitude and relief, rushes forward and says, "Here I am. Send me!" Or not, but more on that later.

Isaiah was no sauntering duck; he flew out of church. Most of us waddle off after worship and sometime during the week, if we're feeling really inspired, we give our wings a flap. In many respects we are not like Isaiah, but I do think that we can identify with parts of this story.

God does break into our lives unexpectedly. Have you ever had the feeling that something mysterious or strange or godly was at work in your life? Maybe not in colossal,

global shifting ways, but in small twinkles of light that glitter for a moment like the reflection cast by a prism on a sunny day. Sometimes I think, “Oh--Jesus just blew by. Or pulled up a chair. Or took out the garbage.” Often I don’t realize that he’s been around until I hear the screen door close and feel, not his presence, but his absence. Then I want to run after him, “Wait! Come back, I promise I’ll notice—I’ll believe--next time. Really.” It’s a matter of seeing, of being open to what is before you and a lot of the time I am so focused on what I’m generating—lists of things to do and lists of things *not* to do--that I am impermeable to God’s advances and pokes.

But that’s not always so. Last week on a morning run, as the mist was settling in the valley and the sun was christening the sky above the Adirondacks pink and the birds were singing with full breasts and perfect pitch, a white tailed deer leapt out of the woods and ran beside me for what seemed like an eternity but was probably about twenty feet. My heart soared like an eagle. “This is it,” I thought, “heaven.” And being for that moment open to this great blessing and being a preacher by trade, in a nanosecond I started to look for meaning and metaphor. This was Jesus in a deer suit, meeting me where I was, assuring me that all would be well, that I was fleet and filled with joy and hope and spring, that power and grace were mine. I suspect this is the kind of message we’d like to hear all the time, but that morning it was perfect—if perhaps just the tiniest bit my own projection. So, full of hope, exuberance and joy, I headed for home. But God was not done with me. Along a shaded stretch of road, about a hundred feet ahead of me, a rangy fox appeared. I stopped in my tracks waiting for him to catch wind of me and flee. Head down, he saw me all right and started slowly coming *towards* me in a kind of drunken weave. I stamped my feet and wondered if they still give rabies shots in your stomach. He was a poor specimen, no plume of tail, no shining fur; he looked like my grandmother’s moth-eaten wrap brought down from the attic. He kept coming and I kept weighing my options: should I whistle or scream and risk frightening him and turning him defensive and aggressive, or should I stand my ground, or run? Just then a huge beast saved me--you can tell that by that time I was seeing everything through the fox’s eyes—a blue Volkswagen Beetle slowed at the scene in the road and the fox slipped over the bank into the trees.

What I read into that, fresh on the heels of my tandem deer run, was how important it is to be careful and watchful because the world can be a dangerous place; there are rabid foxes wandering through tea parties on the lawn while string quartets play Vivaldi's *Spring*. Our lives are full of blessing, but also of trial, of happiness and fear, of angels and burning coals. Our hunger for God is sharpened by need and desperation, by an acute awareness of our own vulnerability. It is also heightened by our suspicion that there is an undeniable thread of evil—of danger, of sin, call it what you will--that somehow got woven into creation. Nowhere do we see more clearly both the fragility of humanity and the saving grace of God than in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God calls us not only to be thankful but also to be savvy and mindful.

This is perhaps the clearest vision I have of Isaiah in this passage, of a person keenly aware of his vulnerabilities, his blessings and his commission. He sees God with rapture and wonder and knows in that instant that he is doomed. But no sooner does that frightening reality dawn on him than the seraph flies to him with the burning coal clutched carefully in a pair of tongs and burns it to Isaiah's lips. In the searing pain of that coal he is told his sins are forgiven and guilt relieved. That's a pretty huge gift. All you Catholics gather round: imagine for one instant the global shift of no guilt forever more, in your entire life, none, from this point on. I don't mean to ignore the assembled Protestants, but when it comes to guilt, the rest of us see through a glass darkly.

Well, Isaiah imagines it clearly and is so liberated that I think he hardly feels the pain of the burning coal. When God asks who shall be sent, Isaiah, bursting with enthusiasm says, "Here I am! Send me." Except I don't think he said that. It's hard to pronounce an S with a hurt lip. I've run into some people this week with sore mouths and they talk funny. One woman was attacked by a heifer and aside from other bruises, she sported a big split lip and an altered voice. Another had her wisdom teeth out and projected her voice like Charlie McCarthy from the back of her throat. No, I think it more likely that what Isaiah hollered to God was, "Here I am! Hnd me!" Because he went to meet God the way we all do, a little battered and bruised.

Isaiah flew to God; after all, he was a prophet. The challenge for us who aspire not to prophecy but to lives more or less honest and true is to translate moments of vision and truth into action, into tomorrow and the day after that. What we must never lose sight of is the humbling

nature of our humanity, the rabid fox waiting to cross our path. The journey to God is more often than not a wrestling match with sin and failing. No one knew this better than the saints and monastics.

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton has long been considered an icon of spirituality. His famous book, *“The Seven Storey Mountain,”* has received worldwide acclaim. He lived in the hills of Kentucky, first at the monastery of Gethsemani and later in a single-room dwelling called the Hermitage. He wrote dozens of books that have been inspiring to people of many different faiths. He directed that his private journals be withheld from publication until 25 years after his death. The last of the seven volumes was released in 1998, and they have been regarded by many as “spiritual scandals.” (Wakefield, Dan. “Spiritually Incorrect.” Beliefnet.com. 6/10/03)

What the journals reveal is that Merton became “a monk with a woman.” (ibid.) During the years of 1966-68, he reverted to his wild Greenwich Village years and nurtured not only his faith but also a tumbler of Jack Daniels and a young nurse whom he loved. In writing the books, he said, “it is not as much as an author that I would speak to you, not as a storyteller, not as a philosopher, not as a friend only: I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self.” His confessions not only made him more accessible as a person, but they made his spiritual path seem less foreign as well. You needn’t be beyond reproach to approach God, in fact, just the opposite. The saints knew better than any the dark night of the soul, the snarling foxes and the promises of God. I would venture to agree with Pascal, that you really can’t know God without hardship. As he said, “Knowledge of God without knowledge of our impoverishment generates arrogance. The knowledge of our impoverishment without knowledge of God generates despair. The knowledge of Jesus Christ constitutes the center ground because there we find both God and our impoverishment.” Pascal, *Pensees* (527).

When we have other things on our mind, it is hard to remember those moments of grace, the feeling of God’s presence. Crisis and despair are not enemies of spiritual growth, on the contrary, they enflame it. The venomous elixir of the mundane is what poisons our yearning for God and sends us waddling from church (to go home and do the laundry or mow the lawn). The challenge for us all is to figure out how to hold on to the feeling we get when we sense ourselves touched by God’s grace.

Today is Father's Day and we will all give at least a passing thought to our own fathers, whether they are gone from us or close at hand. Whether they were wonderful or difficult, our fathers—and mothers for that matter---have been pivotal in each of our lives. Have you found yourself saying, especially if your father has died, “As Dad used to say...” or “As your grandfather used to say....” Some of their frequent comments become woven into family lore through generations; they are singed into us like the burning coal from the seraph. And they speak to us perhaps of wisdom or humor and though we cherish the advice, we hold more tenderly to the simple memory of him.

But for some the burning coal was destructive and hurtful and instead of a blessing, the wound on our lip is a weeping cold sore that comes back to haunt us again and again. For those whose lives have been more wounded than blessed by their fathers, this can be a difficult day, bringing with it, as it does, pain and sorrow.

Though we may recognize that our trials can bring us closer to God, can find us hammering on God's door for answers and salvation, it is also true that this is not always the case. Each of us has experienced times when our wailings are apparently unheard, when God is otherwise engaged. At these times, it behooves us, I think, to remember the cross and what it says about suffering and salvation.

Many years ago when our children were little we took them, one snowy December evening, to hear The Messiah at St. Augustine's church in Montpelier. When it was over and we stood up to leave and turned towards the back of the church, our daughter Eliza, then perhaps 6, gasped at the larger than life crucifix of Jesus hanging on the back wall of the sanctuary. “Imagine,” she said, “having that for decoration!”

The cross does indeed speak of the absolute worse that could happen, the crucifixion of Jesus. But, it also in that exact nano second proclaims the absolute best that could ever happen, the resurrection and salvation of us all. However you understand that very complicated, mysterious and glorious happening, there is no separating the suffering and the salvation, the bad and the good, the deer and the fox. We are wrapped up in this tense and spiritual mystery all of our days but we are held always by God. In the midst of our darkest hour, God comes to stand with us, to lead us out, to guide us to a future of light.

Sooner or later we all get our wings or our lips burned; we are brought down a peg and stopped in our tracks. The challenge is not to retreat and nurse our wounds but to realize in that wake up call that God's forgiveness and grace are never ending. This is the word of God, the holy writ on which we are called to live our lives and fly from this place resplendent, saying, "Here I am! Hene me!" Amen.