

Encounter with the Holy

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
May 26, 2024, Trinity Sunday

The holiness of God draws us in, and encounters with God change us.

When we encounter the holiness of God,

it marks us,

it changes us,

sometimes it scorches us,

We do not walk away from an encounter with God the same as we were before.

In both of our texts today – with Isaiah and with Nicodemus –

We see our ancestors having encounters with the holiness of God.

Isaiah encounters God's holiness in the temple.

Verses 1-4 demonstrate God's holiness in vivid, imaginative language:

The hem of God's robe is enough to fill the temple

There are seraph angels flying above God,

the six-winged variety

Covering their faces, covering their feet, and flying

They're singing our opening hymn today, "Holy, holy, holy!"

And the foundations of the entire temple are quivering at it

all.

Our cynical, sophisticated, contemporary minds can read this,
and think, "I bet that didn't happen."

But young children and artists read this and are drawn in.

Nicodemus' encounter doesn't seem so dramatic. He's just having a conversation.

But it happens at night, perhaps because Nicodemus doesn't want his fellow Pharisees to know that he's drawn to Jesus.

Jesus talks to him about seeing the kingdom of God,

And entering the kingdom of God,

And how both of those involve being born a second time,

Being born from above.

This second birth is not exactly something that we control,

Just like our first birth was not something that we controlled.

This second birth, this new birth, this new start, this change

Is a gift from the Holy Spirit, the Holy Wind, the Holy Breath of

God.

We cannot control the Holy Wind,
any more than we can control the second birth.
But it comes to us, it comes upon us, and according to John 3:16,
It leads us to new life, eternal life, abundant life.
It changes us and it heals us.

When we encounter God, the changes that are made in us are not always dramatic.
Sometimes – maybe most of the time – they are more like small shifts,
like the tacking of a sailboat as you move this way and then that,
under the power of God’s Holy Wind.
We come to know that we have been drifting away from God,
and God brings us back.
These small, steady shifts happen in daily prayer, in journaling, in
Conversations with trusted friends.

But there are times where the changes wrought in us by an encounter with God are pronounced.

We realize that our lives were not going in the direction of God at all,
That we were running away from our vocation in life,
That our lives were well off-course,
And an encounter with God can turn us around:

We may begin to demonstrate a significant change in our behavior,
Like a decision to enter recovery for an addiction
Or finally a willingness to have a long overdue conversation,
Or a newly discovered capacity to handle difficult situations
Or we may feel like we have had a protective coating ripped off,
By what one writer has called the ‘severe mercy’ of God¹,

And we discover the presence of God with us
In the midst of our greatest losses,
A presence that does not make the losses go away
And does not necessarily even make things easier for us,
But is simply the knowledge that we are not completely alone.

When this happens, we have had a Nicodemus experience, and we may find ourselves saying, “I feel like I’ve been born again. I’m starting over.”

Encounters with God change us.

This may actually be a reason why we can be tempted to stay away from God –
We have an intuition that an encounter with God will be disruptive.

¹ Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (Harper and Row, 1977).

An encounter with God will stir our pot.
An encounter with God will rock our boat.
Encounters with God are not ways for us to shore up the status quo.
But they are ways for us to be healed, and to be renewed.
 When our boat is drifting away from God,
 And away from God's call for our lives,
 The encounter with God can rescue us.

It has often been said that religious people can sometimes feel more comfortable
Talking *about* God
Than talking *to* God.
Can you feel the difference between talking to God and talking about God?

And I can tell you from personal experience that there is a similar temptation
To try to *know* lots of things about God –
To be able to discourse about various doctrines and attributes of God –
Rather than to cultivate and pursue a deepening personal knowledge *of* God.
Can you feel the difference between knowing God and knowing things about
God?

Knowledge about God, talking about God, will have a tendency to puff us up with
grandiosity;

 Talking to God and developing personal knowledge of God
 Leads us to greater humility and compassion for others.

As the Apostle Paul said, "If I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, but do not
have love, I am *nothing*."

Talking about God and knowing things about God are important, and they have their
place,

 But they do not *change* you the way
 that talking to God and knowing God personally do.

One of the biblical images for the presence of God is fire.

 We see this in Isaiah 6,
 Where in his encounter with the holiness of God in the temple,
 Isaiah has his mouth touched with a burning coal.

Some of you will be glad
 that we do not use burning coals in our liturgy here at Lewinsville. ☺

The angel does not use the burning coal as an instrument of torture,
 But as a means of cleansing and purification.
 God's holiness scorches us sometimes,
 Burning up the parts of us that are cruel

And stubborn
And mean
And self-absorbed
And fearful.

Those parts are not serving us well, so we actually want them to be taken away.
We want to submit to God's purifying fire.

But many of those parts have been with us for long years.
And we have become habituated to protect ourselves with these patterns,
These defensive walls that we use to keep ourselves safe and secure,
And we may think, "Well, that's just how I am."

But when those parts leave us feeling anxious or resentful or greedy,
When we are clenching our fists tight,
Rather than opening our hands in generosity and freedom,
Then we realize that those things actually are not how we are.

For we were created in the image of God,
And God is not anxious or resentful or greedy,
but is generous and free.
Our true selves are generous and free
compassionate and courageous
Clear, creative, and true.

Friends, you and I are not meant to drift along,
Wandering aimlessly and anxiously along a path that is not going anywhere.
You have been created by the generous and free God
To live a life of generosity and freedom
To be an agent of justice and mercy and reconciliation and love
in our world that is starving for those things.
In order to live these ways, we need to be born again.
We need to be renewed by the Holy Spirit.
We need to be purified by the fire of God.
We need to be changed
And encounters with God change us.

Let us come into God's presence,
God's holy presence that changes us.
Let us breathe in God's Spirit,
let us allow the flow of God's Spirit to move through us
let us connect with the presence of Christ who dwells within us

And then let us go forth to encounter Christ everywhere we go.

To God, and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.