

Pentecost I/Trinity Sunday
Isaiah 6:1-8 and John 3:1-10
May 30, 2021
Rev. Dr. Amy P. McCullough
“Finding God”

“Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” These words were written by St. Augustine in the 4th century and still they echo true. Our restless hearts seek God. Each of us wants to experience God, whether we imagine that experience as a mystical closeness, an abiding sense of being loved, a friendship with Jesus that guides our days, or an inner conviction that our choices - about families, work, service – have been divinely directed. We seek God.

Today I want to delve into this human search for God by way of the two biblical characters found in our readings. Isaiah is an 8th century BCE prophet, while Nicodemus is an almost-disciple of Jesus. Each character finds himself immersed in a holy encounter, asked to respond to a divine presence making a claim upon their life. What might these characters tell us about finding God?

Isaiah lived in Judah, the southern portion of Israel’s divided kingdom during a time of crisis. It is the year King Uzziah died and with the king’s death a relatively stable time gives way to increasing threats from aggressive neighbors, unfaithful leaders, and complacent citizens. A prophet in the king’s court, Isaiah will wander the hallways with a sense of impending doom. What we know of him is confined to what his speech, but the ease with which he describes his vision in the temple makes one suspect he is familiar with the sacred setting. Here is a man whose visits to the temple are too numerous to count. He knows its nooks and corners. He has watched the light streams through the openings. Let’s imagine Isaiah as that weekly worshiper, the one whose character has been refined by regular prayer, study, and service. Isaiah represents one who faithfully checks the candles, clears the table after sacrifices, and sweeps around the altar. Deep devotion guides his actions and beneath that devotion lives a yearning to be in found by God.

It is all very ordinary until the day he is granted a vision, as the altar gives way to God sitting on the heavenly throne. So magnificent is God’s being, so vast is God’s presence, that only the hem of God’s robe is visible. Around the robe’s edges are seraphs singing. Alongside the seraphs, a fire is burning. God is here, but God is huge, hidden, and holy.

The instinctive response to such a glimpse of heaven is to exclaim I am not worthy. I am not fit to be in the presence of glory. God is so great; I am so lowly. It is akin to standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon and being overwhelmed by its intricate beauty, attuned to the centuries of wind and rain hollowing out the earth. Scanning the horizon you easily affirm, “all the earth is full of God’s glory.” And then recognize yourself as tiny, finite, and guilty of trampling on earth’s beauty and exploiting her resources. To stand in the presence of God is to know ourselves as small, temporary, and sinful.

Yet the encounter continues. A line is drawn between God's holiness and Isaiah's heavy heart by way of a seraph, who brings a coal from the fire up to Isaiah's lips. The fire ignited by God's glory becomes a burning passion within Isaiah, a longing to be sent out to speak God's word. Who will go for God? Please, send me.

Isaiah represents the person who shows up every Sunday, hoping for the holy, often only receiving the ho-hum. Until the day the veil parts, the heavens open, and one sees how God is always working, always filling the earth with glory, and forever crying out truths to any caught in their own sin. How do we seek God? Isaiah encourages us to keep showing up, expecting a moment when a vision of God ruling with mercy, order and love will be revealed. The glimpse into God may be more disorienting than comfortable, more frightening than cozy, more painful in what it exposes than assuring of what will be. But once you've glimpsed the holiness, you will have fire into your belly, passion into your heart. Keep at it.

If Isaiah is stepped in heavenly vision, Nicodemus is a man governed by practicality. Although not a committed disciple, Nicodemus has encountered enough of Jesus to sense God at work in him, the Word made flesh. But Nicodemus is cautious. He comes to Jesus at night, when his interest would be hidden from others, and asks for more information. Nicodemus, says Richard Carter, "is intrigued but afraid . . . Like many of us who are drawn to Jesus, he is fascinated but unsure, pulled in and yet pulling back, wanting to enter the encounter and yet anxious about what the journey entails."¹

Jesus answers Nicodemus with an instruction: to enter into God's kingdom you must be born anew from above. The description is intentionally over-loaded with meaning. Born again, anew, from above. It sounds strange, impossible, and something only God can do. Nicodemus does not understand. Who would? But he stays stubbornly stuck in his misunderstanding, insisting that the path be clear before he commits it. Jesus, in contrast, keeps adding onto the mystery. This new birth is by the Spirit, he says, the Spirit that is wind, breath and holiness all together. The Spirit's presence can be felt but not seen. The Spirit blows in every direction. The path cannot be known before you begin the journey. Unable to move closer to such mystery, Nicodemus fades from the scene.

As a character, then, Nicodemus offers a word of caution about being too cautious with our faith. He shuts down a divine encounter because he wants control and certainty. Jesus is inviting him into mystery. Nicodemus seeks an explanation. Jesus says surrender. "A birth from above," notes one scholar, "is based on what God is doing in us."² And for God to freely work within us, we need to let go, relinquishing foreknowledge about how the Spirit will blow, certainty over exactly what will be swept away or into sight, and control over how everything will turn out in the end. God is greater, wiser, and stronger by far than us, but God cannot fully act in your life without our surrender to the Spirit's movement.

¹ Carter, Richard, "Living in the Midst of the Trinity," Preached at St. Martin in the Fields, London, May 27, 2018, <https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/trinity-sunday-9/>. Accessed May 27, 2021.

² O'Day, Gail R., "The Gospel of John" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 549.

So which character best speaks into your struggles? Are you in need of a heavenly vision, a holy moment because your inspiration is lagging, your morale is weakening, and the crises seem only to worsen? Are you hoping for a cleansing of your heart or more fire in your belly? Or are you confused by this Jesus who beckons you onward and anxious about the unknown journey? Do you need some encouragement to loosen your tight grip upon your life? The Spirit is unpredictable but she is also trustworthy. For each of us, our end lies in God's good hands.

"Our hearts are restless until they rest in God." Augustine's famous words begin, "O God, you have made us for yourself and hearts are restless until they rest in you." We belong to God and we are restless until we are home. May the days ahead find you walking homeward to the God who never ceases to call your name. Amen.