

Growing Faith For Growth
A Sermon by Richard Clewell
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Isaiah 6: 1-8, Luke 5: 1-11

We come together as a community of faith to worship God each Sunday morning or evening. In the music, the prayers, the liturgy, the sermon, the communion the living Lord is to be encountered. Yet, I really wonder often what we take away from worship and talk about following the services. How many of us talk about God? I've heard comments about how uplifting the music was, about the wonderful or obscure hymns we've sung (who picks them out anyway?), how interesting or boring the delivery or content of the sermon, and who was missing this week. I am genuinely intrigued by the seeming lack of excitement about any on-going meetings with the living Christ. Are such encounters not occurring or are we just reluctant to talk about God, Jesus and the Spirit's relationship in our lives? Kyle Childress, a pastor in Texas, tells of a friend who said he was thinking of coming to Kyle's church and asked, "Do you talk about Jesus and Christ and God and all that?" Kyle responded laughingly, "Well, yes we try to talk about Jesus as often as possible" and then added more seriously, "You know, he is central to everything we're about." The friend hasn't shown up yet. A question which we all must examine is, "How real is God in my life?"

Our scripture texts from today's lectionary have much in common. Isaiah meets God face to face in the temple, recognizes his own unworthiness, is cleansed, and answers God's call to difficult service as his prophet. In the epistle text from 1 Corinthians 15, Paul recounts the resurrected Christ appearing to him as "one untimely born, for I am the least of the apostles." And in Luke, Simon Peter encounters Jesus as follows: (Read Luke 5: 1-11).

This account is not a healing, exorcism, or miracle but is an experience of God's calling in the ordinary context of living. The call did not come in a holy place but in the midst of daily life and work. Simon, James and John had done nothing to warrant or earn Jesus' call to them. God's encounter is as unpredictable as it is unmerited. When Jesus directs Simon to put the boat out in deep water and let down his trammel nets, Simon the expert fisherman initially protests that they had done that all night without success. But in Jesus' words, Simon experiences something unique and responds, "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." Of course, the results are overwhelmingly convincing and in Jesus' presence, Simon recognizes his willfulness and sin which opens him to God's grace and call. Jesus does not have to say "follow me" but commissions him to a new kind of fishing. In encountering God in Christ, they experience forgiveness, acceptance and have no question about following the direction offered. The call of the kingdom reversed their priorities and reordered their

commitments – “they left everything and followed him.” This doesn’t mean that they never failed again or always understood the way of God’s kingdom revealed in Jesus. But they were on a new journey of faith which had more engagements with the glory and grace of God and they, in turn brought God’s grace, acceptance, and calling to many as they and their followers turned the world system on its head. They were known for their love for one another and their concern about others even in the midst of a fearful world system of empire.

Christianity is about a way of life, a path – Jesus being “the way, the truth, the life” and we, as Christians are the people of that way. Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, states, “Being Christian involves not just “talk,” but the transformation of our lives.” This transformation takes place in the presence of God. I believe God encounters us in many ways in our journey of faith – sometimes dramatically in visions, less dramatically in some of our dreams, often in internal prodding or leadings, through people, through worship, scripture, prayer and devotional practices.” The author, Frederick Buechner writes about the way God speaks to us in the events of our lives: “Listen to your life. Listen to what happens to you because it is through what happens to you that God speaks - - - it’s a language which is not always easy to decipher, but it’s there powerfully, memorably, unforgettably.”

The Christian life is not about believing or doing what we need to believe or do so that we can be saved. Rather, it’s about acknowledging God’s love and acceptance and developing our faith and life in that on-going relationship. The way of God’s kingdom is that its citizens want to learn a new way of life and are willing to commit themselves to the full cost of that choice. The kingdom way has a purpose which isn’t everyone’s cup of tea. Brian McLaren in speaking of such purpose declares, “Martin Luther King Jr. learned what happens when you preach an inclusive message of reconciliation. Bishop Romero learned what happens when you call people to gather rather than scatter. Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela learned what happens when you try to expand the borders of who is considered “in” and worthy of dignity and respect. On the other hand, if you start expanding the borders and working for a God-centered inclusive and reconciling network of relationships, you will quickly find that there are plenty of people willing to insult you, imprison you, torture you, and kill you. They prefer the rigid boundaries and impermeable wall of their narrow domains and constricted turf, not God’s purposefully inclusive kingdom that calls the least “the greatest” and welcomes the outcast.”

Isaiah’s call was to a very difficult task of pronouncing judgment on the nation of Judea for their failure to live their faith in accordance with the way of their Lord. Because the prophet experienced God’s glory and gracious cleansing, he feels for his people and asks “How long?” in a prayer of intercession for mercy. The response is that there is still hope of renewal even in the face of almost total destruction of all that nation held dear. There are times priests need to take the prophetic role and also the prophet needs to continue the priestly pastoral function. Sometimes you will find your pastors

in the roles of comforters and caregivers. Sometime you'll experience us as teachers and instructors in the way of the kingdom of God. And sometimes you will be challenged by issues raised which you may not want but need to hear. Hopefully, in all these ways God will encounter us and you.

As we look forward to our life together in this community of faith called Fairmount Presbyterian Church, a growing faith is indispensable to our calling to be God's people in this world. Jesus declared the "coming of the kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, "look, here it is" or "there!" for the kingdom of God is "within you" (Lk. 17:20,21). As our faith grows in our burgeoning relationship to God in worship, prayer, and gracious acts of mercy and compassion in our calling, others will be drawn to experience God in their journey, and they too will respond to a renewed and transforming life which is informed and directed by the Spirit of the Living Christ.

In a recent *Christian Century* article, the story was related about an ornery civil rights attorney who made his state's county sheriffs sweat with fear but heard the name of a local pastor raised in conversation and said, "That preacher and his church scare me." When asked, "Scared? You? Why?", he replied, "Because they remind me of God." About three or four years later he promised his dying father that he would return to church, and he hasn't missed a Sunday since, sitting with his wife in the second row. One day, while eating lunch with a group of attorneys, he said something uncommonly gentle to an overworked waitress. One of the attorneys remarked, "What's gotten into you?" "I'm a Christian now."

So, how do we represent God in our outlook and behaviors? It involves seeing who God is and who we are; recognizing this through confession and a conscience informed in the way; and being committed to a change of heart and a new way of life. This is how the kingdom of God grows and becomes a reality as the Spirit leads us. "Christ in you, the hope of glory." So may it be as we go forward.

Amen

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