

Sermon, July 11, 2020

“Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

That’s the cry of Isaiah at the beginning of chapter 64. And I daresay it has echoed in the heart of just about every believer at one time or another.

“Oh, God, things are such a mess! Please, just come down and set everything to rights! Fix this!” I’m willing to bet that most of the people in this room have felt something like that at one point or another. We can be driven to despair by the pain, the confusion, the injustice we see around us, and we throw up our hands and say, “This isn’t fixable, at least not by me, not by any humans I know. Only God can mend brokenness that runs this deep. God, please, just step into the middle of this mess and sort it out!”

And yet, we human beings have continued setting barriers between ourselves and God, muffling His voice if we don’t close our ears to it altogether.

The reason? Sin. We don’t do it out of spite or sinful intention, but because we know ourselves to be sinful, the sound of God’s voice terrifies us. There is something in the sound of His voice when we hear it unfiltered that speaks to us of His infinite Holiness, His infinite power and immutable justice. And seeing ourselves as we are, we hide ourselves from Him, from His voice.

It started in the Garden.

Adam and Eve, after they’ve eaten of the fruit they’d been told not to eat, realize they’re naked. They hide their nakedness with leaves and themselves from God. This, from Genesis: “But the LORD God called out to the man, “Where are you?” “I heard Your voice in the garden,” he replied, “and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.”

So the decision to hide from God, to put in our spiritual earplugs and keep God at a safe distance began.

Much later in the story of God's relationship to His people we see it yet again. This time God has just saved His people from slavery in Egypt. He has done amazing things among the Egyptians through His servant, Moses. He has opened the Red Sea and led the Israelites through it on dry ground. And then He has closed the sea on the pursuing armies.

Moses and God's people are gathered at Mount Sinai. God is ready to enter into a new and intimate relationship with them but the sound of His voice frightens them. They are sure that if they ever hear it directly they will die. They say to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."

And so the tablets and Moses' staff and some of the manna are boxed up in the Ark and the Ark is put into the Tent of Meeting, and God's "presence" travels with them, but in at a safe distance. Even the priests who carry the Ark from place to place keep their distance. The Ark had golden rings on two of its sides and rods of acacia wood were passed through them so that no one would have to touch this place wherein God's presence lay.

God had wanted to rule over His people Himself, but they'd chosen to hear from Him through an intermediary. They even decide that they would rather have a king than rely on a judge or a prophet to lean them. God is unhappy with this, but He relents and grants them a king, King Saul.

Now, hundreds of years later, we hear Isaiah crying, "Oh, God, tear open the barriers we've built between us and you, and come to fix all this!"

And I can hear God saying back to him, to them, "It's not like I didn't try. But you kept stuffing me back into your safe little boxes."

This brings us to today's reading from Second Samuel. In it we see David going off after he's safely ensconced in Jerusalem, to bring the Ark, God's

safe little box, back from captivity among the Philistines. But the people who selected our readings left out a big chunk. A really important chunk, in my estimation.

Our reading starts off with verses 1-5 of chapter 6, but then it skips all the way to verse 12. One of those decisions made by people who think their job is to try to keep God from looking bad. They worry about this passage because in it, Uzzah and his sons are leading the Ark of the Covenant toward Jerusalem on a brand new cart, but the oxen pulling the cart stumble, so Uzzah puts out his hand to steady the Ark, keep it from falling off the cart. And when he touches it, “the anger of the Lord blazes against him” and he dies, which scares the dickens out of poor David and he decides he’d better not bring the Ark in after all. (Though he does, after he finds out how the Ark has blessed the guy, Obed-edom, with whom he left it.)

But our lectionary folks don’t like when bad things happen to good people, so they left that out. They left out the part where someone who, though a good person in general, is nonetheless deeply aware of his sin, this man comes into intimate contact with the Holy One of Israel and he can’t handle it. He dies.

He dies keeping God in His safe little box. Those of you who read the Bible study stuff I sent out this week know the question I asked. “What if God WANTED out of His box? What if this stumbling of the oxen was another attempt by God to break through to us, to be with us the way He always wanted to?

But we couldn’t handle it. Uzzah couldn’t handle it, and that moment of intimacy with God overwhelmed him. The author of 2 Samuel calls it “wrath” or “anger” depending on your translation, but I call it holiness.

Let’s skip forward a generation. David brings the Ark in, but God tells him not to build a temple for him because he, David, is “a man of blood.” A reference to all the blood David shed in battle.

But his son, Solomon, he builds a temple for the Lord. And in the center of this temple is the “Holy of Holies,” where the Ark rests, rather like the Tent of Meeting. Only the high priest could go into this place to make offering for the people once a year. And that priest would go in with a rope tied around his ankle, just in case he died and they had to pull him back out.

This was the new, safe place the Presence of God was contained.

Solomon’s Temple was torn down, but when it was rebuilt, they still had a “Holy of Holies” just without the Ark. It had been lost by this time. But God was still in His safe place where nobody ever went.

And God still wanted out.

And He GOT out.

Remember when Isaiah cried, “Oh, that you might tear open the heavens and come down?”

Well, He finally did. In the first chapter of Mark, the one we’re reading during this, Year B, we find:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

Now, Jesus could hear that voice and not be overwhelmed by it, right? Because he didn’t have that awareness of sin that we carry around. And what did He hear. “You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

And then Jesus spent three years teaching us not to be afraid of His Father because He knew he was going to tear the heavens open for good and fix it so we could all hear that same voice saying that same thing.

And then He did, he tore the heavens open and shredded the last barrier between God and us, when he died on the Cross.

You see, when Jesus died, the veil that hung over the entrance to the Holy of Holies was torn right in half. That thing that separated you and me from intimate conversation with God was shredded. Why? Because Jesus took that burden of our sin that we carry around on Himself so that we could hear His Father without being consumed by the Holiness of His voice. He made it possible for you and me, because of His sacrifice, to hear God saying to us, "You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased!"

It's still a little scary, hearing that. I mean, if you take what He's telling you seriously, everything changes. All those things you thought you had to have to survive, they lose their power over you. You're cut free from all the things that you've bound yourself to, and you can feel very much adrift at first.

And you also realize that, as His beloved, you are empowered! You can actually change the world. Some of us are just more comfortable thinking there's nothing we can do, but we CAN! We can do something, make a real difference.

We no longer need to ask God to tear open the heavens and come down. He already has, and in doing that He also made it possible for us to hear Him speaking, speaking life and power and restoration and freedom into our lives and the lives around us.

He's speaking to me now.

He's speaking to you now, and He's saying.

You. You, You are my beloved. And with you am very well pleased! Amen.