

“Isaiah – A Place for the Imperfect”

March 1, 2020

A Place at the Table series – 1st Sunday in Lent

Last week, we ended our “Faith in Film” series with a story of two people who sat across a table from each other and became good friends. The table became a place of transformation as the two, who had very little love for each other initially, realized that they had more in common than they thought. The table can be a powerful place for us to learn and grow.

Tables are really centerpieces in our lives. They are places of sharing a meal, making friends and connections, solving problems, playing, drawing, writing - and sometimes just a place to land. Thinking about my dad in these days has brought back memories of meals around our family dinner table and learning to play Euchre by watching my parents and their friends.

Tables can be places of welcome and hospitality - or not. When there’s no room or when there’s an unwelcome spirit at the table, there’s pain. If we’re thinking about what it means to have “a place at the table” - to be represented and heard when important decisions are being made that affect us - having that place and voice is important.

Of course, the table has a prime place in the sanctuary. The altar table helps us focus for worship with an open Bible, candles that remind us of the power of light, and bread and cup that remind us of the love of God - the grace of God - offered to us in simple things. So we journey in this season of Lent talking about the table and our place (and everyone’s place) at it.

A pastor friend of mine shared a story from Ash Wednesday. Some of the kids in her church were curious about the ashes. They wanted to see them and touch them. Before she knew it, she was down low teaching them the words to say about being dust and returning to dust, and they were putting their fingers in the ashes and making the cross of ashes on her forehead. She came away with a lot of ash crosses. A 3-year-old looked at her and said, “You’re a mess, but Jesus loves you anyway.”

Deeper truth has never been so clearly spoken! That’s really the message of Ash Wednesday - and this whole season as we look inside ourselves. We’re a mess - we’re very human, and Jesus loves us anyway. What Good News! That doesn’t mean we don’t do the work to become more like Jesus, but there’s a deep truth that we need to hear and claim.

That's the power of the prophet Isaiah's encounter with God in the Temple. That's what happened to him. He got a reminder that he was human - and that God was holy. And he was never the same again.

Next to God, our imperfections become very clear. That's not a reason to be constantly down on ourselves, but it's an opportunity to see ourselves as we are - flawed and forgiven, imperfect and undeniably loved. Certainly there's a lot we could say about the holiness of God. That's what Isaiah experiences, but that's not all. Isaiah comes to his senses through his senses - seeing, hearing, touching. He sees himself clearly in light of God's holiness. Isaiah is unclean, a sinner. He's imperfect. He sees God more clearly, too. God is merciful and forgiving and loving.

Perhaps that was something Isaiah already knew, but this moment clinches it. But it's not a "woe is me!" moment. This is a time when Isaiah is thunderstruck. It's a moment of clarity that leads him into a path of service. To be clear, his path isn't an easy one, but understanding who he is - an imperfect person - is the only way he can respond in faith to God when God is looking for someone who will serve faithfully.

This is why Ash Wednesday is such a powerful time of worship for me. I need to remember that I'm human, flawed, imperfect - and dearly loved enough that the God of the universe made a way for grace to cover sin and life to conquer death. And I'll tell you truly that hearing that word is powerful after facing the death of my dad. Life does conquer death - by the grace of God.

There's not a directive to wait to be perfect to come to God. Isaiah recognizes his flaws, his failings, his faults - and he even expresses his fears. We have all of those, too, but that's not enough for God to turn away and not use us for God's purposes. God makes a way.

This is such a vivid encounter - one of those "thin places" where heaven and earth meet. And it's especially powerful to consider what's going on in Isaiah's world. It was the year King Uzziah died, and some scholars say it was a time of leadership transition from one king to another. Folks were anxious about the future, and Isaiah would be the one to call them to account because of how they had rebelled against God. He would convey God's message to them: cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. God calls Isaiah to walk with God's people through exile and offer promises of restoration and hope for the future.

Most scholars also believe that Isaiah came from the priestly class, so it wasn't uncommon for him to be in the Temple. But this day was different. This incredible vision, seraphs singing, Isaiah's confession, hot coal on his lips, forgiveness spoken, the

Lord asking, “who will go?” and Isaiah saying, “Here am I. Send me!” Literally, Isaiah says, “Ready!”

It happens to us, too - maybe not quite the same way - but it happens. We experience the presence and power of God as a disruption or an interruption as we’re going about the everyday stuff of our lives. Our plans are changed, and in the midst of it, God shows up (but has been there all the time). God is revealed to us in a brand-new way, and we see ourselves in a new way, too.

Isaiah’s call challenges us to think about what happens in worship and what it’s all about for us. We sing and say that God is “holy, holy, holy.” And our sense of God’s holiness is key to worship. We don’t worship to get something for ourselves, but to praise God who is holy, awesome, and worthy.

Worship isn’t about us, but about God. God is the One whom we worship. Someone offered a challenging word: “We don’t come to worship just to have our so-called “felt needs” met, but also to *find out* just what our needs really are! We don’t come to chum around with the God we want, but to encounter the true God in ways that make us into the kind of people *God* wants!”

And we live into this season of Lent, as we celebrate God’s grace in Holy Communion today, confession is where we begin. When Isaiah experiences this incredible vision of God, his first reaction is confession. He confesses his sin to God. He doesn’t gloss over his sin or make excuses for it. He speaks it clearly and boldly.

We’re led to radical honesty about who we are when we seek God and encounter God. We are sinners who need God who saves us. We are imperfect. Just like Isaiah, we have unclean lips, and we have to confess our sin so that we recognize that God is bigger than us, that God is HOLY, that God is God and we are not! When we confess our sin to God, we are drawn into deeper trust in God’s power to forgive, reconcile, and make us new.

After his confession, Isaiah is cleansed, purified, forgiven. Isaiah felt a barrier between himself and the Lord. According to his account, he couldn’t be in God’s presence, let alone in God’s service! But God removes the barrier. God doesn’t shun or condemn Isaiah, but frees him of his guilt.

And when Isaiah is forgiven and freed of that guilt, he responds to God’s question, “who will go?” He answers the call - Ready! - and is sent to be a prophet of God to the people. The adage is “God isn’t so much concerned with our ability, but is more concerned with our availability.” Are we available to God? Are we ready to be used by God? There’s a place for us - even imperfect us.

So today we come to the table set by the Lord. We receive the bread and cup. We stand in awe and wonder of who God is – almighty, holy, Creator, Redeemer,

Sustainer, the One who saves us by grace through faith. And we claim the love of God who knows each of us and loves us more than we can fathom. God is holy and exalted and beyond our imaginations and is near to us all at once. We live in the mystery and blessing of God's grace singing and saying "holy, holy, holy" and giving thanks for God's intimate knowledge and love for you and me.

But that's not the end. We're not simply here to be consumers - to feel good, to take and eat. We gather for worship, experience God, hear the truth about who we are and who God is, and also hear that we're a part of God's work in the world. We're here to experience what Isaiah experienced: to be both comforted and convicted by a vision of God, changed by God's grace, cleansed by God, and called by God to serve.

This is about serving God and others - and if you know anything about Isaiah's ride as a prophet, it's not an easy life to speak to the people about the things they had done and not done - and all of the ways they had grieved God. We're walking this Lent knowing that the way isn't an easy journey. It's hard, sometimes weary, many times uncertain, but all the time traveled in the company of one another and all the time in the company of the One who will never leave us or forsake us.

There's a place at the table for the imperfect.

Thanks be to God. Let us pray...