

Put me in Coach, I'm ready to play!

The Holy Trinity
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29;
Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

My husband and two of our children went to see a Senators baseball game Friday night. I would love to have gone with them, but I was shepherding my eight year old daughter and her Brownie troop on a trip to Washington, DC. So, sometime this summer I hope to get to a baseball game because I do enjoy watching it . . . much more so than playing it. I never played on a softball team in high school. We played softball in gym each spring, but to be truthful I hated it, because I'm not in the least athletic. When I did have to play softball in gym, I always was sent to the outfield. I went willingly, because I knew that at least there in the outfield I could daydream and pick dandelions most of the time.

One particular daydream I had went like this. The batter would smack a ball in my direction, and I would run back, back, glove up, reaching high, the crowd erupting in cheers as I, Nancy Rouse, would catch the ball! But the daydream was always tempered and elbowed out by a much stronger emotion for, as satisfying as I found that daydream to be, the reality was I was utterly terrified the ball might indeed come my way. I liked being in the outfield because that meant I didn't have to play shortstop or, worse yet, I didn't have to play first base. And the odds were in my favor that as long as I was in the outfield, the ball and I might never make contact. And all the time I was in the outfield, I was waiting for that third out so I could retreat once more to the dugout.

Maybe the prophet Isaiah really didn't want that ball to come to him, either. Did you ever think that? Maybe Isaiah would have been content to remain in the outfield, so to speak, a relative unknown in Judah. But we hear today in our Old Testament lesson, how the ball suddenly is smacked right in his very specific direction. No daydreaming, no picking dandelions for Isaiah, no siree! Instead, in the blink of an eye, Isaiah is granted an awesome vision, and in the midst of that vision, he receives the Lord God's call to be a prophet.

Isaiah's vision is of the Almighty God, seated on a high throne in the innermost part of the temple in Jerusalem. And for we who hear Isaiah's description of that vision, it is a visual image of splendor and majesty and mystery: the Lord God, enthroned in power, surrounded by heavenly beings who declare that His glory fills the earth, who proclaim the holiness of this God; six-winged creatures say that all the world is under this God's rule. There is a shaking of the pillars of the temple. There is smoke that fills the air, and we are left with no doubt that what Isaiah sees is something that no human being has ever seen.

And Isaiah's reaction? Well, it's much like my reaction in the outfield had the ball come my way – **utter terror**. He feels “out of his league” (to continue with the baseball metaphor –

I'll try not to have too much fun with this!). Here is this mere human being – mortal, imperfect, profane, sinful – standing in the glory of the perfect, of the most holy goodness that is the Lord God Himself. Isaiah knows he doesn't belong in that holy place. He feels like it's the wrong position for him, and I think he'd much rather hide in the dugout for the rest of the game.

I realize Isaiah's vision is foreign to us, almost surreal to us, because we look at the world through the eyes of rationality; we typically use reason more than sense perception to make sense of what we see and therefore it would be easy to dismiss Isaiah's vision out of hand. But we must not do so. We have to take into account what Isaiah saw, what Isaiah encountered, so that we can understand how and why he responded to God's call.

Maybe we need to reflect on the mystery of God in our own lives. Where do we encounter the holy? Or where does the holy encounter us? Where do we experience awe? I suggest that we do indeed experience and encounter the mystery and wonder of the Lord God in our daily lives – we just often simply fail to recognize it. But every once in a while, every once in a while we **do** recognize it, and possibly it comes when we least expect it.

A Presbyterian writer named Kimberlee Ireton described how she felt in the first few weeks following the birth of her son. She was experiencing a severe postpartum depression. She was fearful and anxious; she was certain she could not take care of her son properly. Nor could she face endless days and nights stretched out ahead of her of colic and feedings and dirty diapers. It was a dark time for her. And then in the midst of that dark time, she recalled one moment when light seemed to shine. It occurred the day she stood at the kitchen sink washing (of all things!) a bunch of Swiss chard. Now, I know what Swiss chard looks like. I know it is an edible vegetable, though my family might say otherwise. I probably have tasted it (though I can't remember when), and I don't know how one prepares Swiss chard. But I'm about to tell you that, believe it or not, Kimberlee Ireton experienced a sense of mystery and awe in a very simple, ordinary act – washing a bunch of Swiss chard at her kitchen sink.

She describes what it was like when she realized just how beautiful that vegetable was – *“the crinkly dark green leaves with their bright red veins, the thick yet silky texture of the leaf as I gently pulled apart each fold to wash inside it, the way the leaves glistened in the sunlight slanting through the kitchen window as I lifted each lifted each leaf out of the water and placed it on the towel beside the sink. Time seemed to stop – or at least cease to matter – as I wondered at the beauty of the chard.”*

Now, before you go out of here today and run to Giant to buy some Swiss chard, let me tell you that Kimberlee says she never again experienced that awe and mystery washing any other kind vegetable. And even though she's washed Swiss chard countless times since then, she never again could recreate that experience. And while she didn't feel the abject terror that Isaiah experienced in his vision, she was able to articulate from benefit of her Swiss chard moment exactly why Isaiah felt the way he did. She explained it this way: *“It is not simply because we are sinful and God is holy. No, it is because God is **Real**, and our finite minds can neither comprehend nor our frail bodies bear the eternity and majesty and the utter real-ness*

of God. . . . In our finitude and weakness we cannot bear to look on ultimate reality any more than we can bear to look directly at the sun.”

But ever after that, Kimberlee was thankful – thankful for the sense of awe, the sense of timelessness, the sense of holiness that she experienced that day, that fleeting glimpse of the real-ness of God who created Swiss chard and her newborn son and the world around her and, yes, created even her own self.

Okay, if it hasn't happened for us in the washing of Swiss chard, has that fleeting glimpse of mystery touched us at some other moment, some simple, ordinary moment? I say it has. For some of you as it was for me, it was when my children were born. Perhaps for some men from our congregation who at the end of this month will go to hike the White Mountains of New Hampshire, perhaps for them it will be for them when they finally stand atop Mt. Washington (6,200 feet and above the tree line) and look at the incredible panoramic vista before them. Perhaps that is awe and mystery.

Sometimes you tell me about the moments when you experience holiness encountering you. Remember back on that April evening when guest organist David Cherwien was here and he led our choirs and our congregation in a glorious hymn festival? Who was here to attend that concert? At least two of you told me later on after that hymn festival something akin to these words: “It was a spiritual experience.” Now, those words don't do justice to what you experienced; there aren't words adequate to describe what really happened – that you had been given a glimpse of the majesty and the holiness of our God who is Lord and rules over all. That's what you experienced.

Back to Isaiah. He has been granted this incredible vision of the Lord God in all his awesomeness, and he's sure he's going to die right on that very spot because he is a mere mortal in the real presence of the eternal divine. But you see the very moment he recognizes his mortality, his finitude, his sinfulness before the true God, it becomes a moment of repentance for him. It's repentance as Isaiah acknowledges the chasm that exists between the Holy One and his own sinfulness and the sinfulness of his people. And that's the moment that another ball gets smacked right to him; it's a line drive right at him – or as Isaiah says, it's a live coal that touches his lips and the Lord God cleanses Isaiah, purifies him. The Lord God bridges the chasm that exists as He encounters his creation. Then, and only then, is Isaiah ready for the ball. The Lord God asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And now Isaiah can say in faith, and respond with courage and commitment, “Here am I; send me!” And there he is, glove in hand, poised to catch whatever ball comes his way, ready to speak God's word faithfully to a sometimes faithless people. It will not be an easy task for him, but he is ready to take on the task of being a prophet of the Lord to people who will often be unwilling to hear the word. He will face great challenges because he has to pronounce judgment – God's judgment – on the people of Judah. Yet he will also have the blessed opportunity of declaring the future, the blessed future that God plans to bring about.

Now use this metaphor in a discussion of Christian discipleship, and the question becomes this – Do we as God's people really want the ball to come to us? Or are we secretly hoping

the ball will go in some other direction? Do we actually feel fear of what God might just ask us to do? Because if the ball does come our way, if it comes to us, we have to do something, we have to respond, and we can only hope and pray that our response will be the faithful response, will be the courageous response.

Praise be to God that just as Isaiah was cleansed as that live coal touched his lips so he could live as God's faithful prophet, you and I have been cleansed in the waters of baptism. The Lord God in all his holiness has bridged the chasm between us. He has adopted us as his children – us, mere mortals, are God's children. He has given us His word that the resurrection of His Son Jesus inaugurates our resurrection, and His Spirit calls and empowers us to live a new life in Him.

Together, you and I, with our newest brothers and sisters who will be received today at Trinity, we will acknowledge the awe and mystery of our encounter with our Lord God, will encounter him through Holy Baptism, and through the Lord's Supper, and even in the simple, ordinary act of gathering here, together, for worship. And then we will pause to consider just what kind of ball might come our way, and how we might be asked to serve God in our world

At Senators baseball games, I often hear John Fogerty's song coming over the loudspeakers: "Put me in, Coach, I'm ready to play – today. Put me in Coach, I'm ready to play – today. Look at me. I can be centerfield." Isn't that what Isaiah says? And us, too, I hope? "*Here am I; send me!*"

AMEN.