

## How Do You Say 'Holy?'

PHILIPPIANS 3:13-14 (NRSV) *Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

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ISAIAH 6:1-8 (NRSV) *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said:*

*"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;*

*"the whole earth is full of his glory."*

*<sup>4</sup>The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup>And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" <sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. <sup>7</sup>The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." <sup>8</sup>Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"*

Henry Ford once said, "Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goals."

The writer of Hebrews writes, *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup>fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith"* (HEBREWS 12:1-2 NIV).

And so in the words of today's text from Philippians, we strive to "forget the past—both good times and bad; both victories and disappointments—all those things that distract us from our goals—all those things that distract our eyes from Jesus—and we press on toward the vision into which God calls us.

Thomas Bandy asks, "What's in your experience with Jesus that this community can't live without? What's so important, so vital, so life-changing about your encounter with Jesus, or your walk with him, or maybe just the touch of the hem of his garment as he passed by in the crowd? How has it changed you, set your feet upon a different path, and made a difference in who you are?" Profound questions.

A few years ago I read about a church council gathering that began with sharing: "How did you experience God this summer?" (Sort of a religious version of "How I spent my summer vacation.")

Several said they'd experienced God in *nature*: a cabin in the woods or on the lake; in a sunset or the cry of a loon's or a summer breeze. "Ah yes," sighed the listeners, basking in sweet memories of their own summertime. "There was God."

Others said they'd experienced God in *children*. Since most of them were over over 55, they mean grandchildren. (People under 35 rarely experience God in

children.) They reflected on innocent smiles, childish laughter, the spontaneity of youth. "Ah yes," sighed the listeners, remembering happy days, "There is God."

A few said they'd experienced God in *music*: a concert, a new CD—Beethoven as they'd never heard him before. "Ah yes," sang the chorus. "There is God."

Then a woman—a newcomer on the council—said hesitantly: "One morning this summer I had an incredible compulsion to go see my ex-husband. Normally I'm not spontaneous, and I don't really like my ex-husband. We hadn't spoken in over a year. But the compulsion was overwhelming; so I gathered my children, and we drove to his house. We found him on the floor, having a heart attack. We called 911 and he survived." There was an uncomfortable shifting of feet. This was *unexpected*. Someone whispered, tensely, "Holy smoke!" Pleasant sunsets, laughing grandchildren, heavenly-sounding music tucked their tails and slipped under the front pew.

Contrast that with today's story from Isaiah: a vision of the Lord. Angel-seraphs hovered above him, singing the Doxology: "Holy, Holy, Holy!"

How do you say "Holy"? People say it in different ways: they bring their child home from the emergency room, having barely escaped serious injury, and lay the sleepy boy in bed, and whisper "Holy!"

I remember the first time I leaned out over the rail above the Upper Falls in Yellowstone National Park: the immense power of that water, squeezed as if from a toothpaste tube, spewing out over the precipice; and I gasped "Holy!"

<sup>1</sup>Do you say, 'Holy!' the same way so many church folk say it: a bored monotone—a ritualized rhythm, as if describing someone else's experience...

"Or do you say "Holy!" like you've just seen the Angel Seraphs and collapsed on the floor in fright. Do you say "Holy!" like your sin has just been exposed on the front page of the *Globe*, and an angel has ripped out your guilt with hot tongs? Do you say "Holy!" and go to lunch, or do you rush out of here to the restaurant or to Wal-Mart—anywhere there might be somebody who needs *to hear about it from you*, because when God asked whom he should send, you had an involuntary and insane compulsion to say 'I'll Go! Send me!'"

When the Holy speaks to the heart it's always breathless and frustrating trying to share it with another person. Yet, the presence of the Holy is so compelling that one simply must share it: "I'll go! Send me!"

The presence of the Holy fills a person with impatience—with a burning desire to do something right now. It invests a single human life with universal significance and infinite worth. It fills people with renewed self-esteem and centers

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<sup>1</sup> Begin section adapted from a sermon by Will Willimon when he was Dean of Chapel at Duke University.

their lives upon a single-minded destiny. "I'll go! Send me!"

The presence of the Holy targets individuals—singles them out and leaves each with a burning question that's never answered: "*Why me?*"<sup>2</sup>

The presence of the Holy answers the question "*What is it about my experience with Jesus that this community can't live without?*" For Christians, that presence always centers on the living Christ—Emmanuel: God with us. The Holy comes to those who *yearn to walk with Jesus above all*—who yearn for a fountain of joy and meaning that dominates every day and every minute—who yearn to explore new possibilities, celebrate new victories, and make a difference in the lives of others.

Church people talk a lot these days about *the presence* ... and that's good. But, as glorious as all this sounds, the truth is that while many church people long for an experience of the Holy, many of us don't recognize it when we enter it.

It's not surprising. Biblical people didn't recognize it, either. Read the great epiphany stories of scripture. Every time God appears to a person in the Bible, the person either shrinks in terror or dreams up a hundred reasons why God should send somebody else (preferably a seminary trained expert).

In Revelation the Holy says, "Look! I am always making all things new!" If your primary goal is to keep things as they are or to make them like they used to be, then don't seek the presence of the Holy. An experience of the Holy is utterly life transforming. It alters past, present, and future—forever.

The Holy motivates people to reach out beyond their comfort zone—beyond their circles of friendship—and it always involves the risk of rejection. People caught up in the presence find themselves on a high learning curve, because the presence is always ahead of them—drawing them to new places. The vision is never contained. It only expands.

And "it grows through sharing—it's defined and refined through community—people united around a shared experience of the Holy. They move to it, march to it, sway to it, and work to it. They may explain it in a thousand variations, but their eyes light up when they sing the song in their hearts, and they will excitedly say 'Yes! Here is how it happened to us!' Together they shape it, savor it, and proclaim it."<sup>3</sup> That's what's in our experience with Jesus that this community can't live without! That's the vision into which God calls us.

Do you hear it? : Do you hear the voice: "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?"

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<sup>2</sup> End section adapted from Will Willimon.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted directly from Will Willimon sermon at Duke University (date has been lost).