

In those ancient days, it was believed that if anyone happened to look upon God he or she would instantly die because the holiness of God would be more than one could bear. That is why, when Elijah was in the cave and God passed by, he saw nothing more than the backside of God as protection against sure death. Isaiah was terrified to be in the temple standing in front of the throne of God, looking at God, because he knew he was doomed!

“Woe is me,” he cried. “Woe is me!”

Have you ever spoken those words? We might not say it quite that way today. Given that we are people of unclean lips, we probably have a few rather salty expressions to get at the feeling Isaiah had. “I’m up the creek without a paddle” is a fairly benign way to say it. “I’m doomed! I’m sunk! I’m hopeless!” You know what I’m talking about. Woe is me!

At one time people felt that way whenever they entered a church. They felt inadequate, unworthy, even condemned to step into a place associated with the presence of God. The Roman Catholic Church offered confession so that some of that stigma could be removed. We offer confession when we worship to try and remove that barrier of sinfulness that often hangs between us and God. Still, there are times when we think, “Woe is me!”

We feel that way because of things we have done. The Apostle Paul was right when he said we “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Isaiah confessed to being a man of unclean lips. That did not mean that he swore like a sailor. He may have used only proper Hebrew and Latin, but if he spoke hatefully about someone, if he harassed another person or besmirched their character, if he spread gossip or lied or did any of the other things that we tend to do with our speech, then he was a person of unclean lips. Add to that list all of the “unclean” things we do with our minds and hands and hearts, we ought to feel woeful. When we do things we know we should not do, we feel like Isaiah felt.

We feel like Isaiah felt because of things we have not done. We all know the old saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. If that is true, I’m certain a pretty good section of that highway is dedicated to me. There are times when we know what the right thing to do is, but we don’t do it. We don’t stand up for a friend who is being picked on or abused. We don’t speak up when someone’s rights are being trampled or when someone in power is taking advantage of others who are more vulnerable. We don’t act when we should. We don’t help when we should. We don’t make a difference

in the world when we know that we should. When we don't do the things that we know we should do, we feel like Isaiah felt.

We feel hopeless when our thoughts get all jumbled up and we are not able to make sense of life anymore.

We feel doomed because other people tell us we should feel that way.

We feel like we are up the creek because our understanding of God is far more like the fiery, demanding head of the Wizard of Oz than it is of a gentle but courageous shepherd who will protect his sheep and go after them when they go astray.

We feel woe because we are sometimes in a hole deeper than we can climb out of.

We feel woe because we don't know where to turn.

We feel woe because life has backed up to our front door and dropped a load of hardship, grief, and unhappiness on us.

We feel woe because . . . well, because we do.

That's how Isaiah felt standing in front of God—this magnificent all knowing, all powerful, ever-present and separate God. The gig was up. He was toast! “Woe is me! I am lost!”

But that is not the end of Isaiah's story. In the next instance he says, “And yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” “And yet” Those two words are Isaiah's story as well. He was in the presence of God and saw God . . . and yet he did not get fried or roasted or toasted or anything else horrible. As he tells the story, Isaiah stood in the presence of God and looked God squarely in the face . . . and lived to tell about it! As for the problem of his unclean lips (and hands and heart and life), the seraphs took care of that, purging his uncleanness with hot coals. Burning away the impurities in his life. Apparently even that experience was not detrimental because Isaiah was able to talk and tell the story.

Isaiah thought he was a dead duck . . . and yet, God planned for him to fly! Perhaps, despite our uncleanness, whatever it might be, God has other plans for us as well.

Isaiah looked on God enthroned in all of his majesty in the temple. Hundreds of years later, other people—with lips just as unclean as Isaiah’s—looked on the face of God as he lay swaddled in a manger in Bethlehem. Later, other people looked on the face of God as he sat in the temple as a young man, asking questions of the teachers. Thousands of people looked at the face of God as he walked around Galilee teaching and preaching and healing and caring about them. Many of them felt woeful—and for good reason. Sad and curious and angry people looked in the face of God as he hung on a cross, heart-broken by the cruelty of the people he had created and loved. And days later, hundreds of people saw the face of God glowing with resurrection joy. And yet, not a soul ever died from the experience of seeing God and being in God’s presence.

Today, through the gift of God’s Spirit, we, too, have the opportunity look on God in a myriad of ways—and we live. We may truly feel woeful, frightened, condemned, or doomed but looking into the face of God, experiencing the presence of God, being renewed by the power of God does not bring death—it gives life!

John tells us the story of Nicodemus, a Pharisee who was afraid of what his fellow Pharisees would think and how they would react if they knew that he suspected Jesus was telling the truth and was the Son of God. He was not so much afraid of looking into the face of God, of finding himself in the presence of God, as he was of not looking for God in the world and not being with God in the world. He had genuine questions for Jesus about who he was and what he was about, so, under the cover of darkness, he sought out Jesus.

Jesus talked about being born again from above. Nicodemus could not quite grasp what Jesus meant because all he could think of was a physical rebirth which he knew was impossible. Jesus explained that he was speaking of a rebirth of our spirit by the Spirit of God. He told Nicodemus that he and all of the world could be renewed within—cleansed, purged, and purified—just like Isaiah in the temple. And he explained that there need be no fear when looking for God because it is God who has come looking for us. With those beautiful words which have never been equaled, Jesus explained: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17).

Professor Tom Long explains what Jesus said in this way:

John says Jesus came because God loves the world, and not the lovable surface world of delightful music, literature, and art, the world of carefree laughter tinkling on the verandas of the privileged, but Nicodemus's world. Though respectable on the surface, it's still the underbelly world of night, the God-hating world of violence, torture, rebellion, and sin. Mysteriously, God loves this world.¹

It sounds a lot like our world, doesn't it? Nicodemus did not fully comprehend the enormity of those words in that moment just we may not here and now. Eventually, however, Nicodemus got it! The message is not "Woe!" but "Wow!" God wants us to see him, to be in his presence, to benefit from his goodness. We're not up the creek without a paddle; we're in the boat with full sails!

Scripture never articulates the doctrine of the Trinity, the understanding that there is one God revealed in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. The idea, however, is evidenced in scripture by the teachings of Jesus which were shared by his disciples and the Apostle Paul. The concept of the Trinity is our way of explaining God's deep desire to be near his people. God wants a relationship with us. No angry, vengeful, punishing God cares about being with the minions under his authority, but the One God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel, the Heavenly Father, God Incarnate in Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit is our Comforter and Companion and cares deeply about a relationship with you and with me.

A Trinitarian understanding of God points to God's persistent desire to be close to us, his people. The Trinity speaks of a God who will stop at nothing to be near us and will, therefore, remove every obstacle that lies between us. So, if I am a person of unclean lips, as Isaiah was, God will purge my lips. If I am a person of unclean hands, God will wash them. If I am a person who does something to separate me from God, God will bridge the gap between us. To be certain, God's love is not merely sentimental but is steadfast. God's grace is not cheap but comes with the cost of dying for the ones God loves. God's cleansing is not a temporary wash but is an eternal

¹Thomas G. Long, "Living By the Word: May 27, Trinity Sunday," *The Christian Century* (May 9, 2018), 20.

freshening. God's rebirth of us is not merely the opportunity for a new start; it is a resurrection to a new life all the way around.

God comes to us as Father and Son and Spirit, as Mother and Brother and Companion, and perhaps in dozens or thousands of other ways unique to our relationship with our Creator. The important thing is that God comes to us and invites us to come to him so that we might be together. In God's presence, we realize that we do not want our unclean lips or hands or minds or spirits. We want to be made new so that we can fully enjoy the life God offers us. God wants us to see him—especially in the person of Jesus—and live so that we might tell it! “Who will go?” God asked. “Here am I,” answered Isaiah. “Send me!”

I have never experienced God the way Isaiah did with light and sound and seraphs swirling all around, but I have felt the way Isaiah felt—both the “Woe!” and the “Wow!” because God so loved me and you that he gave us his only Son in order that we might have eternal life—now and forever! No more “Woe is me” because in Christ I have seen God and with the Spirit I have felt God; and yet, I live! And so do you! Thanks be to God! Amen.

May 27, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Almighty and Everlasting God, you are the creator of all nature and nations and the grantor of liberty. You are the One who came to dwell among us and to offer yourself for us, that we might know freedom from sin and death and the abundant and joyful life which you intended for us. You are the Sustainer of our lives in this and every moment, empowering us to love and equipping us to serve. All praise we give to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; our Creator, Redeemer, and Friend.

We come, O God, to offer our thanks and praise this day for the freedoms and blessings we enjoy in this great land. Our hearts are filled with gratitude for our opportunities to work, to learn, to speak, to worship. We thank you for men and women who have sacrificed so much to secure liberty for us and for peoples around the world. We offer our gratitude for family and friends who give our lives meaning and purpose. We thank you for the glory of your creation which testifies to your power and your love for us. We give thanks that you invite us into your presence and call us to live as your children.

Even as our hearts fill with gratitude because of the blessings of life and liberty which we enjoy, our hearts also break because of the overwhelming needs around us. Too many of our brothers and sisters in the human family suffer persecution because of religious or political convictions. Grant us courage to work for their freedom, knowing that none are truly free until all are free. Too many around the world suffer because of hunger, disease, or violence. Give us hearts of compassion and spirits of peace that the needs of others might move us to respond. Too many in our own community feel the pain of loneliness or illness or despair. O Lord, so fill us with your generosity and hospitality that they will overflow abundantly from our lives, that our actions and attitudes may bring healing and reconciliation.

Forgive us when we do not seek liberty and justice for all who are living in this land and when we fail to protect the most vulnerable among us. Teach us to offer mercy, to act compassionately, to love kindness, and to seek peace. Make of us messengers of your hope and love with the knowledge that by your grace, we can bring light and life to a dark and hurting world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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