

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“A Four-Step Dance:
God reveals, We repent, God restores, We respond”
By Eric Howell
Isaiah 6:1-5; Luke 5:1-11; I Corinthians 15:1-11
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It seems that what Christianity offers is a simple exchange. God gives new life. Sinners accept it. God moves toward us. We move toward God. Problem solved. But that's not the biblical picture. It's a bit more complex and significantly more true to human experience. The Bible gives us a dance and the vision of Isaiah is a poignant example.

The first step is God's toward Isaiah. God is revealed. Isaiah sees the Lord sitting on a throne high and lofty. The hem of His robe filled the temple. Really Isaiah, you saw God? Tell us more. No, that's all you get. You probably can't handle more. All you need to know is that that hem of His robe filled the temple. Not His glory, not the majesty of His robe, not the robe itself, just the hem . . . the hem itself filled the temple. You'll have to imagine the rest. There are angels with six wings, singing a song of praise, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." We might think it's redundant to say holy three times. Isn't once enough? In Hebrew, saying something once makes the point. Saying it a second time reinforces it. Saying it a third takes it beyond the words. Holy, holy, holy is God. This is the first step. God is revealed.

The second step then is Isaiah's. Not a step forward, but a step backward. "Woe is me! I am lost. 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!" How clumsy would it have been for Isaiah to immediately rush toward God. Instead of running toward God, Isaiah draws back. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't speak. I have nothing to offer. I have nothing to give. It has been said that sin is a theological achievement. You don't know you are a sinner until you meet God. Only when you meet God's holiness, righteousness, and goodness do you look back at yourself and see the difference. Then you know . . . I am lost. This drawing back is sometimes called repentance, confession, humility. It is not a strategy; it is the natural response to encountering the holy God. We pull back. Literally, Isaiah's "Woe is me" is "Oy." It is an expression of deep stress, if not distress. It is a place many of us know too well.

With Isaiah drawn back, God moves forward again. The divine dance is not finished with God in the lead. God moves forward again—this time with redemption. Isaiah confessed, "I am a man of unclean lips." So his lips were purified. A red-hot coal was lifted from the altar and touched to his lips. This seems like a violent response from God. Here's a person in spiritual and existential agony and fear for his mortal being, then is, what we would call, tortured. But obviously that is not the sense of the story. This is purification. God redeems what we confess. And it might hurt a little along the way. It might hurt a lot. What you give to God, you give to God, and whether it's the biblical

imagery of pruning with shears, or refining with fire, or taking up your cross—when you give your life to God, you give it to God, “who chases away our guilt and blots out our sin.”

The fourth step in the dance is Isaiah’s: The man of woe, silenced by his fears and unworthiness, becomes the man of mission, emboldened by his new life, “Here I am; send me!” For the first time, the man of earth, now the man of God, takes a step toward God in the dance. No longer as clumsy as two left feet, he moves forward with humble confidence in the one who has changed his life. Here I am. Send me.

This is a four-step dance—God reveals, Isaiah repents, God restores, Isaiah responds. And what we find is this dance twirling over dance floors all over scripture as bewildered people encounter the Living God.

In the gospel reading from Luke this morning, Jesus and Peter dance. God is revealed as Jesus teaches and then directs Peter and the other fishermen to a miraculous catch of fish. Peter repents, “I am a sinful man.” Jesus restores, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will be fishers of men.” Peter responds, leaving everything to follow Him.

In the epistle reading this morning, Paul recounts this dance. God is revealed through the life of Christ and the resurrection appearances. Paul’s response is to call himself “the least of the apostles, one untimely born.” God restores him by grace. Paul responds by proclaiming the gospel that many came to believe.

All through our passages this morning, we see this dance. And we see it through all of scripture. Story after story: Adam and Eve hiding in the bushes in shame; barefooted Moses at that burning bush stammering that he can’t go talk to Pharaoh; philandering David in sackcloth and ashes; scared Elijah hiding in the cave; over and over again, when God is revealed, the heavenly band of angels strikes up the dance music again.

Is it any surprise that many people, if not most people, can join Isaiah’s heart-cry, “Woe is me.” Whether it is directly an encounter with God, or just running into the wall of life, most of us have some place in our life of deep stress or distress. The more you get to know people, the more you know this is true. The more someone gets to know you, the more someone will know this about you. Perhaps none of us have stood in such a place as Isaiah stood, directly before the Throne of God, hearing the songs of angels, or have knelt before Jesus in our own fishing boat like Peter, or been stuck blind like Paul, but some of us have felt like Isaiah felt about something in our lives—like this experience is going to kill me. I may not survive this.

I received an email recently from a friend who was asking me to do something or other, a typical sort of email. But the opening wasn’t typical. It began, “I know your family is walking through some grief right now, and I hope you know I’ve been taking some moments to offer prayers on your behalf as you’ve come to mind.” Isn’t that nice? Wouldn’t you like to get that sort of message in a time of woe? So would I. The thing is that I hadn’t talked with him about anything. I didn’t know what he was referring to or what had prompted his note. I appreciated it, but I was also curious. So, after a couple of

exchanges, we figured it out. He had received a forwarded message about the grief of a mutual friend and mistakenly thought it was about my family. So, I was getting the prayers and comfort this poor other person was supposed to be getting. Lucky me. We straightened it out and got his prayers rightly oriented.

I appreciated the sentiment, misdirected as it was. But I was struck by something . . . what if we opened every message to other people with the gentle acknowledgement of life's challenges, something like "I know your family is walking through some grief right now, and I've been taking some moments to offer prayers on your behalf as you've come to mind." Even if we didn't know anything specific at all, we'd get it right most of the time. Friend, I know you are going through some deep stress right now, some distress in your family, and you are in my prayers. . . . If every message began like that, and if you prayed for every person you said you were praying for, you'd get it right nine out of ten times. And people would think you are clairvoyant. So you'd have that going for you.

Isaiah's prayer is our prayer at one time or another in one circumstance or another. The *oy* of Isaiah wasn't because he was in God's presence. Being in God's presence revealed the *oy* that already was his life. Life can bring great woe into our hearts, whether the source of that woe is an increased awareness of particular sin in your life or whether the woe is just the circumstances and relationships that are the fabric of daily living. Or both. It's usually both. There are usually things in our lives that ought not be there that we allowed in: habits, attitudes, actions, behaviors, choices. When we stand in Isaiah's sandals and suddenly confess our deep woe, maybe it would come out: "I am a person of unclean lips by what I speak"; or "I am one of unclean eyes by what I look at"; "unclean hands by what I do"; "unclean feet by where I go"; "unclean wallet by how I spend my money"; "unclean ears by what I listen to"; "unclean stomach by what I put in myself." Or maybe we would just skip right past the swirl of condemnation in our own minds and just lay ourselves right down, "Lord, I am unclean, totally and completely, depraved and unworthy in your presence." Some people feel that way when they just think about coming to church. They feel a deep unsettling about being part of a people like this, doing things like this, encountering a God like this. We'd probably all do well to feel a bit of that, a bit of nervousness in God's house, at least a small bit of discomfort, of wonder and awe, of fear for speaking to and about the divine. We'd all do well to be slower to speak for God, to first stand as one unworthy, woe is me. I am not worthy unless You make me worthy. There are usually things in our lives that ought not be there. These come into stark relief when we come near God.

Woe isn't just the sinner's prayer, however. Isaiah knew a woe that was his own personal unworthiness before God and a deep distress of the relationships surrounding him. "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." The deepest places of woe in our lives often come in our relationships with those closest to us. That's where the brokenness we each have is compounded and multiplied. No matter where you are—home, office, school, church, coffee shop, or highway, you are surrounded by people who are broken. Too bad for you. If you thought Christianity was about escaping all of that, you are probably disappointed by now. If Jesus' example is any indication, it's not about escaping it to get to God; it's getting more of God into it.

Sometimes, we just have to live with the woe. There's no quick fix and no easy solution. Sometimes, we can't fix ourselves, and we can't fix someone else. Like Jacob who walked with a limp after wrestling with God, we have a limp that marks us as one who has wrestled long nights with angels.

Even with that limp, maybe because of it, sometimes, Christians forget how to dance. We forget that to come again into God's holy presence is to experience deep woe at our own lives and confess that before God. Or maybe we don't forget. Maybe we remember it all too well and it doesn't feel too good, so we'd rather not do that, so what we do then is just avoid coming into God's illuminating presence and we miss the great reversal. God takes that place of brokenness and doesn't hide it or overlook it. God says, friend, the place where you are broken, where you are shamed, where you are desperate, where you are hurting, where you have the stain of your sin . . . that place, the one that hurts . . . that's exactly the place I want if you'll let Me have it. I can use that. What I can't use are the places you won't relinquish to Me, the places you think you can solve on your own or are good enough for you. The places in your life you hold on to out of whatever . . . pride, laziness, satisfaction . . . there's nothing I can do with those. It's the broken place I make strong. Remember, it's with wounds that I saved the world.

The whole arc of the biblical narrative is that we are all fallen far short of the glory of God, but God's not done with us yet. Adam's story is our story. Isaiah's confession is ours. So is Moses' burning bush. Thomas' doubt and Peter's reckless faith. God did not just send an angel to touch us, but sent His Son, true God from true God, to be man, not just to touch our sin, but enter in and take our sin. The grace given to Isaiah was a foreshadow of the redemption offered to the world in Christ.

We are set free and sent out, "Here I am, send me." In the hands of the Holy Spirit, we become the instrument on which is played this ancient song of redemption, that the whole world might hear the inviting beat, feel the rhythm, and make their way onto the cosmic dance floor where their divine partner awaits to lead the steps that are learned by people everywhere who give themselves to The Master, and are fresh and new with the shy, furtive shuffle of each new dancer, each of whom says in one way or another, "Oh, I can't dance. I've got two left feet and no rhythm. I'll step on your toes and I've got this limp. I'll just sit against the wall in the corner." You don't think you can dance? You are just the one I'm looking for.

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