

DEPTH CALLS TO DEPTH

The Holy Trinity – Cycle B: Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17

It was Pastor Donna Seamone, the founder of our women's group Sophia's Circle, who first used the phrase "depth calls to depth" in my hearing. I don't remember the context, but I remember my resonance with her statement. Among other things, it suggests that there are people who have a gift for seeing beneath the surface of things and naming the truth about them; and when they share their insights with others, their comments turn on lights and are apt to inspire observation, curiosity, investigation, analysis, reflection, and eventually a deeper understanding, a knowing.

In our readings this morning, the depth that is God calls to those who, from their anxiety, perhaps even from their suffering, seek God. And in their holy encounter, they are blessed.

Isaiah's concern for the tribe of Judah is significant. Judah is in crisis, and Isaiah has no difficulty in seeing an approaching political and military disaster. His faith in God is considerable, but the call he feels to speak truth to power, King Ahaz, to be precise, is daunting. Isaiah's voice is the last voice Ahaz will want to hear. But Isaiah's call will not go away; and out of his anxiety he has a vision; and his vision is of a God who is wholly God, a God whose heavenly majesty extends beyond earth's imagining; a God whose power and greatness makes the whole earth tremble. This God is the strength Judah needs to survive the pending disaster; this God will remain faithful, even though Judah's leadership is flawed and nationalistic.

Ironically, this first scene of Isaiah's vision makes him feel unworthy. He is filled with the knowledge of his own sin and guilt, and he is aware that the Hebrew people are equally unworthy. But then, the second scene of his vision releases a deeper understanding of the relationship between God and the people of God. It is a scene in which God seeks people, perhaps more earnestly than Isaiah seeks God. And in Isaiah's vision of a seraph removing a hot coal from the altar of God and touching it to Isaiah's mouth, he is at once healed of his immobilizing sin and guilt and commissioned to be God's prophet to Ahaz and to the people of Judah. The depth that is God called to the depth that was Isaiah, and Isaiah discovered within himself the courage, the strength, and the vision to do God's will and to be God's voice in the hostile environment in which he was immersed. There may have been no one else at the time, other than Isaiah, who had the capacity to see the extent of God's goodness, God's faithfulness, and God's vision for a world free from the lust for power and the contagion of greed. The depth that is God called to Isaiah using merely Isaiah's faith – and it was enough! Depth called to depth.

The encounter Jesus has with Nicodemus in today's Gospel is similar. On first reading, we tend to hear the two men talking past each other. Nicodemus not understanding, and Jesus, intentionally, it seems, talking over his head. But John's narrative contains clues about Nicodemus's capacity for the faith Jesus suggests Nicodemus lacks. Nicodemus has broken rank with the Sanhedrin Council, Jesus' fiercest adversaries. John tells us that he comes to Jesus alone: in every other scene in the gospels, there are always Pharisees in the plural. By coming to Jesus by himself, Nicodemus rises above the rest, in a sense. John also tells us that he comes at night, probably under the cloak of darkness, not because he is uncomfortable with Jesus, as much as he is uncomfortable with his peers. And so, their conversation begins. The exchange is extremely challenging for Nicodemus: he struggles to understand Jesus' terms of reference concerning being born again and born in the Spirit; and to complicate matters, Jesus' rhetoric is close to insulting, suggesting that Nicodemus is a fraud as a religious leader. But Nicodemus does not shy away from Jesus: he stays to listen to Jesus' prophesy his own death and resurrection, explain God's plan of salvation, and describe the magnificence of the gospel.

There is no tidy conclusion to this account as there is with Isaiah's vision; but we know that Nicodemus was changed by his encounter with Jesus. In John 7, he speaks in defence of Jesus before the Sanhedrin; and at the end of John's gospel, he joins Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus' body for burial. Joseph is described by John as a secret disciple of Jesus; by association, we recognize that Nicodemus, too, was alive in the Spirit.

Somewhere in its long evolution, the church recognized that depth calling to depth was the Spirit of God revealing God to people. It was just last week in the Pentecost Gospel that we heard Jesus speak of an

Advocate, the Spirit of truth which he and the Father would send to speak through his disciples; to turn them from disciples (“learners”) into apostles (“those who are sent out” with the good news of God). The doctrine of the holy Trinity recognizes that for God to be continually revealed within and among us, we must acknowledge this seeking, teaching, and calling dimension of God which through observation, curiosity, investigation, analysis, and reflection, provides the depth we need to walk forward in faith.

Some years ago, I preached a sermon about God being as plain as the nose on your face. And then I asked, “How easy is it, without the benefit of a mirror, to see the nose on your face?” God surrounds us in the world of nature, in the love of family and friends, in random acts of kindness by complete strangers, in the wonder and mystery of life, in blessing and strength and grace – and yet we do not see it. God is as plain as the nose on our faces, which means only that we need the grace of the Holy Spirit to know God as Creator, to receive God’s Christ as Way, Truth, and Life; to be the depth to which God can call. Blessed be the holy Trinity, one God, the fountain of living water, the rock who gave us birth, our light and our salvation.

Today’s readings would have us as Isaiah and Nicodemus in a world that is blind to visions of God’s majesty and power, and deaf to Christ’s truth concerning God’s mercy, love, and justice. If, as Jesus said to Nicodemus, we can be alive in the Spirit, if we can believe in the God revealed to us in Christ Jesus, his life, ministry, death, and resurrection, then depth will be able to call to depth; we can take our place in the apostolic succession and the communion of saints; and the world can move forward with God’s voice calling through the voice of God’s people: God to the world; depth calling to depth.