

Text: Isa 6:1-7, Lk 5:1-11, 1 Cor 15:1-11

Title: When Meeting God Hurts

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For the last four weeks, Jan has walked us through the 12 steps that people use in recovery groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. During these sermons Jan talked a good deal about what it means to struggle with an addiction – to struggle with something which you want so much that it gains power over you, and causes you to do things which hurt yourself and others. Three weeks from today is the First Sunday in Lent. Lent is a period of 40 days when Christians acknowledge and struggle with their sins and finitude in preparation for Easter, which is the celebration of Jesus' resurrection and victory over sin and death. As I wrote today's sermon, I was thinking a lot about these two themes – addiction recovery behind us and the struggle against sin ahead of us. I wanted to try to bridge these two themes, and with impeccable timing, the lectionary provided three passages which do that perfectly.

The lectionary is a list or recommended scripture readings: four readings for each Sunday. Jan and I preach from it periodically. Very often, the four passages for a given Sunday appear to have nothing to do with one another, and so you get to pick which one to use. But this Sunday, three of them fit together very well, and we have read all three. Each of the passages we read (Isaiah, Luke and 1 Corinthians) center on a main character whose initial encounter with God and Jesus leads to some negative emotions and declarations.

- Isaiah says, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips!"
- Simon, who is later known as Peter says, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!"
- And Paul, recalling what he learned in his encounter, says, "I am not even worthy to be called an apostle!"

These men did not find their initial encounters with God comforting. Paul's initial encounter is recounted in Acts 9. This encounter left him blind and shaken. Isaiah's encounter left him with burned and blistered lips. And all three of their encounters left the men emotionally distressing to the point of being in pain! The emotional pain of these encounters is rooted in two realizations the characters have:

- 1) God is Great! God is amazing! God is bigger and better than I could possibly have imagined!

Now that doesn't sound that painful. But then, following the first realization – in fact growing out of it almost immediately:

- 2) I am not great! I am not amazing! I am smaller and worse than I could possibly have imagined!

When these men of God actually met God, they found that it hurt! God was better than they thought, and they were worse.

Paul's sinfulness must have come as a shock to him. Back before the encounter, he had devoted his entire life to perfecting his following of the Torah – the Jewish instructions for how to please God and lead a good life. Paul was a Pharisee, which was a form of Judaism prevalent around the time of Jesus and which tried to adapt the teachings of the Torah to every aspect of Jewish

life. By Paul's own account and Luke's account, Paul was a zealous Pharisee – passionately trying to live his life in harmony with God. Looking back on his life before the encounter, Paul later writes that if anyone had reason to boast of his works and his lineage, he had more reason.”¹

As for Isaiah and Peter, we don't really know if they were surprised by their encounter or not. Peter was a fisherman, which means that he was likely not the most promising boy in his religion class. Isaiah's life before his call is less clear. I imagine that they had some knowledge that they were not perfect – a general sense that they could do better, but that this sense was not well defined. And since it was not well defined, it could be ignored. And anytime that feeling became too strong to be ignored, they could always find someone a little bit worse than they were to compare themselves to. Sound familiar?

But when God showed up on the scene, none of the three could define themselves by the people they could look down on any longer; they had to define themselves by the One whom they had to look up to. In our passages this morning, all three men acknowledge their sinfulness openly and honestly, without regard for who heard. The cat was out of the bag – it was painfully obvious. They knew it and God knew it and so it doesn't matter who else knew it. Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever been struck by another's goodness that you knew you had a long way to go?

Some of you may know this story about me and my friend Dan. Dan is a Buddhist Monastic. He and I went to college together, and both went to seminary about this same time, but in different traditions. One winter break, we met up with a mutual friend for lunch. It was Indianapolis and it was pretty cold. On our walk from where we met to a local Indian restaurant, we passed a homeless man, asking for money. Dan, reached in his wallet, pulled out a dollar and handed it over. My friend and I kept walking to lunch. This happened 2 more times on the way to lunch. We had a lovely 2 hour meal together, sharing stories of our work at our various schools. We paid for lunch and headed back to our cars. Now on the way back, we passed one more homeless man, who again asked for money – this time, when Dan pulled out his wallet, I noticed all his small bills were gone, he was left with a 20 and nothing else. “I guess today is your lucky day” Dan said, and handed the 20 over. And that was the moment when I knew – I was a sinful person. “Give to all that ask of you.” “Woe is me! For I have unclean lips!” Have you ever had a moment like that? It doesn't have to be about giving money to the poor – it can be about any area where someone or something else shows you a better way and you realize how bad your own way is.

There is another interesting thing about Peter and Isaiah's responses. Can you hear it? They don't say “Forgive me Lord.” Or “Help me lord!” They say “Woe is me!” “Leave me alone!” Those are the words of people who assume that they will be condemned. People who have been trusting in their ability to emphasize their good works and mask their bad works. When even their good works are shown to be far short of good in the light of God's true goodness, they have lost according to their system of salvation. They are unclean and sinful and there is nothing that they can do about it. So they give themselves up for lost. And this is the reason that they believe they will be condemned – because they believe that they should be condemned. Peter and Isaiah

¹ Philippians 3:4-6

don't understand grace when they first encounter God. What a shock it must have been to both of them (and perhaps all three of them) when God said to them, your sins are forgiven.

It must have been an even bigger shock when God said to them, "now let's get to work. I want you to be my messenger to the world." For that is what they all became – messengers for God. Isaiah is called to be God's prophet – perhaps the most well known prophet of the Old Testament. Peter is called to be Jesus' pre-eminent disciple and apostle, becoming a key leader in the early church, converting 3,000 people with a single sermon. Paul is called to found churches across the known world, become the pre-eminent evangelist to the gentiles, and become one of the most well represented writers in the New Testament. Not bad for three sinners who thought God couldn't use them, huh?

There are three main things I want us to note about these encounters.

First, only after they acknowledge their own sin can they experience forgiveness. Early in each of the three stories, the characters acknowledge their sinfulness. It is only after that point that they experience God's forgiveness. Now I do not mean to say that God only forgives people who realize they were wrong and say they are sorry. What I do mean to say is that the more a person realizes how in need of forgiveness they are, the more powerful that forgiveness will be to that person. You know this – if a loved one doesn't think that they have done something wrong, and you say, "I forgive you," what do they do? At best, they shrug it off – at worst, they feel angry and insulted, because they mistake your absolution for passive aggressive condemnation. Only after they acknowledge their own sin can they experience forgiveness.

Second, only after they are forgiven can they get to work, and once they are forgiven, they need to get right to work. Peter is told to come and fish for people. He is found the next day following Jesus, having left everything. Paul is told to go to a nearby city and wait for instructions. Isaiah, his lips still stinging from the fiery coal, is asked, "Whom shall I send?" And responds: "Send me." The three men do not hear the call of God before their sins are forgiven, and once they have heard, there is no time to waste. That is why we confess our sin at the beginning of every service – as a preparation for hearing God's Word to us. And that is why reading the word directly follows being forgiven and passing the peace – because there is no time to waste – no reason to dwell on our sin – it is time to get to work.

Third, despite the fact that they have given themselves up for lost, God does not give them up for lost or useless. In fact, God believes that the three can be redeemed long after they have given up hope. God forgives them and then gives them a task. That is perhaps the most encouraging and hopeful part these stories – God keeps working with them as long as they keep working with God. God is not a quitter.

Now these stories are important because they can teach us about our own stories. These stories describe more than encounters ancient people had with God millennia ago. They also teach us about the encounters we could have with God, today. We just finished the series on 12 step programs – programs where the first step is getting over denial. Denial is bad for lots of reasons. It is dishonest. It eats us inside, because we know that we are not being truthful and we know

that others really don't know who we are. But most importantly, it prevents us from experiencing forgiveness and moving forward. It traps us. It stunts us.

So why do we do it? Probably the same reason that the men in our three stories did it – fear of condemnation. We are afraid that others will reject us. We are afraid that God will reject us. We are afraid that we will reject ourselves, and so we try to pretend that we are acceptable, that we are good, that we are perfect. We know that we are not, but we have been going along this way for so long that we think we can't come clean now.

You see, our fear of condemnation traps us in limbo. We cannot turn and be forgiven because we are afraid to acknowledge our sin. We are paralyzed by a fear of God because we think that God will condemn us. And so we shrink from admitting our sin. The tragic irony is that the total strength of God's radical and complete forgiveness is available to us, and is exactly what we need to move forward. So, our fear of condemnation prevents us from the honesty which will allow us to experience real forgiveness and growth. We have locked ourselves in a room from which we desperately want to escape – but the lock is on our side. And every time we are dishonest with God, we feel a little bit worse, and a little bit more isolated, and a little bit less likely to be honest in prayer or with other people in the future.

As you prepare for the season of Lent, I encourage you to be honest with yourself and with God. The things that you fear – the shortcomings you perceive – the sin which has tripped you up for 10 years – those things are what you need to be honest about. The amazing thing is that they will begin to lose their power the minute you speak the truth about them.

Today we celebrate communion – one of the most powerful symbols of God's love for us. Today we take of the one bread of life and the one cup of salvation. Lying, stealing, coveting, cheating, abusing others, abusing yourself, whatever you sin is, this bread is broken for you. What ever you did 10 years ago, whatever you did this morning on the way to church, this cup is poured out for you. Shed blood and shattered body for all of us. See how much God loves us – that he would lay down his life for us. Paul saw it – Paul, who killed Christians for their faith – taken mothers from their children and husbands from their wives solely because they confessed Christ as Lord. And yet he found in the bread and the cup symbols of that powerful forgiveness. How can we see that and fear condemnation? God offers a way forward. It is there for your. It will be painful at first – honesty about sin usually is. But the path through it is the only way to true joy. Will you take it?