

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

First Lesson

Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”

[And he said, “Go, and say to this people:

“Keep on hearing, but do not understand;  
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’  
Make the heart of this people dull,  
and their ears heavy,  
and blind their eyes;  
lest they see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,  
and understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed.”

Then I said, “How long, O Lord?”

And he said:

“Until cities lie waste

without inhabitant,  
and houses without people,  
and the land is a desolate waste,  
and the LORD removes people far away,  
and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.  
And though a tenth remain in it,  
it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak,  
whose stump remains  
when it is felled.”  
The holy seed is its stump.] (ESV)

## Second Lesson

1 Corinthians 15:1–11

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

Luke 5:1–11

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat

down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him. (ESV)

## Questions and Comments for Discussion

### First Lesson

I’ll just review a little bit for context. Isaiah’s time of ministry begins in the mid 8th Century BC, during the latter years of the reign of the king Uzziah. It continued through kings Jotham and Ahaz, and concludes in the fourteenth year of the reign of Hezekiah. He prophesied in the kingdom of Judah, not the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

The study of the history of God’s people during these years, up and through the beginning of the Babylonian exile would be a fascinating study in itself, but since the Divergences are focused on the Lectionary, I’ll leave that for another project.

This week’s reading begins with Isaiah’s “call” and then goes on to have God instruct him to prophesy the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by Assyria and what we now call the Diaspora, the scattering of the northern tribes throughout the ancient world. This was the manner of occupation Sennacherib used to pacify the lands he conquered - scatter the inhabitants among his other conquered territories and send in new peoples to inhabit and work the land, peoples who have no sense of attachment to the land, so they have no real reason to rise up to try to set this land free.

(This is the origin of the people known as the Samaritans, people who were sent into Israel in the region of Samaria and tried, with middling success, to pick up the religion of the place they now inhabited, so they were always looked down upon by the Jews who lived and worshiped in Judah.)

It is also interesting that as Sennacherib threatened Judah at a later date, Isaiah, in the next chapter, is sent to reassure the king that the invader’s plans will not succeed, and in

this passage we find the Christmas lesson about the virgin (in Hebrew, just a young woman) giving birth to a child, Emmanuel.

Now to the lesson itself. Back on Trinity Sunday in Year B we had the first part of our reading for this weekend. In the Divergence for that Sunday I shared something I'd learned that suggested this vision had actually come much later in Isaiah's ministry. Rather than recap all that here, I'll provide this [LINK](#) if you'd like to go look at it. It's rather interesting (at least to me).

This week I'd like to look at the confusing prophecy that is in the optional section of the reading:

And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

"Keep on hearing, but do not understand;  
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'  
Make the heart of this people dull,  
and their ears heavy,  
and blind their eyes;  
lest they see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,  
and understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed."

Then I said, "How long, O Lord?"

And he said:

"Until cities lie waste  
without inhabitant,  
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and the land is a desolate waste,  
and the LORD removes people far away,  
and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.  
And though a tenth remain in it,  
it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak,  
whose stump remains  
when it is felled."  
The holy seed is its stump.

I've done a good bit of looking, but I cannot find a consensus on what this means. As I suggested in the Divergence from Trinity Sunday, this makes a bit more sense if we read

it from later in Isaiah's career. But no matter the temporal location of the prophecy that Isaiah was given, it remains that God appears to be determined to deafen ears and blind eyes *in order that* the people will fail to respond and ultimately see their cities "lie in waste." That doesn't sound like the loving God that Jesus called "Abba."

Here are my own thoughts on it, taken from my own experience. When I am caught up in my own sin, when I have convinced myself that what I'm doing is the right thing to do, no matter how loving the words of correction are, I will resist them. I will harden my heart to the point of brittleness before I allow those words to bring change. Once the walls of my heart have become that hard, that brittle, one well-placed tap, one careful word will shatter this barrier, and I will find myself standing undefended before the love that will not stop pursuing me. My "city," the system I've built around this sin will lie in waste, but "the holy seed" will lie within the "stump" that remains.

Just my take...

## Second Lesson

Okay. I'm going to break with the lectionary here. (Big surprise.)

Yes, I see how in the season of Epiphany that Paul's list of how and when the risen Jesus manifested Himself to the Apostles (and he includes himself among them, even though as the least) kind of fits with the revealing of Christ to the nations, but they totally skipped chapter 14. I mean, chapter 13 had next to nothing to do with Epiphany, so why skip 14?

I'll tell you why I think it is. Because they'd rather you didn't read it too closely. It makes Paul look bad. Especially if you read it with a careless eye.

But Paul gets a really bad rap for being against women, even misogynist in some corners, and chapter 14 is often cited as part of the reason, so I'm going to break with the lectionary here to explain to you why that just isn't so and why chapter 14 actually says quite the opposite about Paul, if read correctly.

In keeping with the way I sometimes go on about spiritual gifts, I'll quote the first verse of the chapter, then skip on to the troublesome part.

1 Corinthians 14:1

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.  
(ESV)

One day I'll come back to that, especially that we might prophesy, but not today. This other stuff is really important.

Later in chapter 14 we read:

1 Corinthians 14:33b–36

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? (ESV)

First, it is unfortunate that the translators have used verse 36 to begin a new paragraph, as though it didn't belong to the passage above it, which it does. The break should be between 36 and 37.

Next, it's worth noting that this passage is so out of keeping with Paul as the ancient church knew him and his work and teachings otherwise that ancient transcriptionists couldn't figure out what to do with 33b-35. Some moved it around in the letter, others omitted it and just put it in the margins! We have manuscripts where these things were done.

But here we are. Paul appears to be telling the women to be silent in church, even though his co-worker Priscilla is known to have founded and led other churches.

What do we make of it?

I begin by reminding you that Paul was writing to one church in a specific setting, one that wasn't doing really well at the time, with a lot of division. He wasn't writing this for other churches to read, so it's understandable that other churches might misunderstand this passage if they lacked the context for it.

And the context is this: Paul is quoting back to the Corinthians part of a letter they wrote to him in verses 33b-35. Those aren't Paul's words, they're words he knows they're saying.

How do we know this?

First, Paul has established a pattern in the letter of citing Corinthian speech or behaviors already in the letter and then contradicting them. This follows that pattern. I haven't been able to relocate the article I read on this some 30 years ago, but the pattern is clear and this is in keeping with it.

Second, and this is the more telling in my mind, is the structure of the Greek.

Paul quotes the words or letter of the Corinthians back to them, then he very clearly contradicts it, if you read the Greek carefully.

Where our translation has "OR was it from you the word of God came?" it should read something more like, "WHAT? Was it from you (MASCULINE plural) the word of God came?"

That word, translated "or" in our translation is a little one letter "particle" in Greek, pronounced "heh," and it means "basically everything I'm going to say after this word contradicts what I said before it." So, "WHAT?" is a much better way to read it.

Then he goes on to say, "Was it from you the word of God came?" And the "you" is in the masculine plural case. Now, it's important to acknowledge that if Paul were speaking to a mixed group, he'd use masculine plural, but if he were speaking to women, to silence them, he'd used feminine plural.

Now I'm going to go out on a bit of a limb, but I think it's a limb worth risking.

From whom did the "word of God" enter the world? From whom did He come?

A woman.

At this point in Paul's ministry he has visited Ephesus, the where he encountered the community that wrote and used the Gospel according to John. It changes his writing, his preaching to a great degree. You have only to compare the letters to the Thessalonians to everything that comes after to see that.

And in Ephesus we have that community whose Gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word." And it seems to fit even better when we read that the verb Paul uses doesn't really translate "came," but "came out." He could have said "*elthen*" for "came," but he said "*exelthen*," came out. Like giving birth.

The weakness in this limb for me is that I have no way of knowing whether or not the Corinthians would have known that way of referring to Jesus. But if they did, then Paul's indictment of their silencing of the women is so much stronger.

Regardless, Paul is clear that he intends to stop the men from silencing the women in church, not encourage such behavior.

And that, my friends, is worth breaking ranks with the lectionary.

### Gospel Text

There are a good variety of directions I could take in discussing our reading from Luke for this week. Fishing for people, the miracle of the fishing nets, lots of things. But I'm going to land for this week's studies on the parallel between this passage and the one from Isaiah. Peter and Isaiah have similar reactions to an encounter with the holiness of God. They see themselves as "unclean" or "sinful," and unworthy.

Instead of focusing on the reaction, I'd like to look at the cause for a moment. It is the encounter with God that brings to consciousness our failings. Seeing the beauty of God's goodness causes us to see ourselves in contrast. This change in perception does not come by the pointing of fingers by others. Oh, shaming people may get them to change behavior temporarily, but it doesn't change their hearts, it doesn't bring them to a place of true repentance. Only the encounter with the Holy One does that. And it does it without accusation, without shaming.

Our first reaction upon recognizing our own sinfulness is to cringe away in fear and or horror. That's because there is still an accuser, pointing at us, declaring our shame. Call that accuser what you like, but the Bible calls him Satan. Chapter 3 of Zechariah has a great image for this moment.

### Zechariah 3:1-5

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?" Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments." And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the LORD was standing by. (ESV)



In that moment of encounter we see ourselves as we are, and Satan takes advantage and stands to accuse, but God rebukes him on our behalf, and clothes us with new, clean garments, like the new baptismal garments I've described before.

I think that the church has too often "thrown the baby out with the bathwater." That is, in our reaction against the preaching of so much guilt, so much accusation, we have steered clear of anything that hinted at sin, at filthy garments. It's easy to understand why, but it's regrettable.

It's simply impossible to stand in the presence of the holiness of God or of Jesus and not suddenly realize that you're covered in dirt of one sort or another. Our job is not to pretend it's not there, but to "come boldly before the throne of grace in time of need" anyways, trusting in the forgiveness of God, manifest in the Blood of His Son.

Now here's the thing that we so often forget.

We can no more change the hearts and behaviors of others through accusation than they can by accusing us.

I suspect that there are any number of people in our lives whose behaviors we'd like to see changed. And the only way to get there? Love them with Jesus' love so that at some point they might encounter Him, and in doing so, see themselves both as filthy and forgiven.

In chapter 16 of John, Jesus speaks of the way that Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin because it does not believe in Him. That's how it works. The "world" (that is, the broken system in which we still live) that God so loves will encounter Him through Holy Spirit, and the world will see itself as it is, sinful, that is, living as though all Creation did not rotate on the axis of a forgiving Creator, which leads to all sorts of sadness and meanness. But even as Satan stands up as the prosecuting attorney to accuse, the Counselor, the Advocate stands up to rebuke him on their, on our behalf.

But pointing to my failings doesn't fix me. Pointing to someone else's failings doesn't fix them. Pointing to, manifesting the glory, the mercy, the holiness of God to others? That's what brings true repentance, true change.