



THE HEM OF GOD'S ROBE

"Ahem - Ahem!"



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There were banks of candles flickering in the distance and clouds of incense thickening the air with holiness and stinging his eyes, and high above him, as if it had always been there but was only now seen for what it was (like a face in the leaves of a tree or a bear among the stars), there was the Mystery Itself, whose gown was the incense and the candles a dusting of gold at the hem. There were winged creatures shouting back and forth the way excited children shout to each other when dusk calls them home, and the whole vast, reeking place started to shake beneath his feet like a wagon going over cobbles, and he cried out, "O God, I am done for! I am foul of mouth and the member of a foul-mouthed race. With my own two eyes I have seen him. I'm a goner and sunk."

Then one of the winged things touched his mouth with fire and said, "There, it will be all right now,"

and the Mystery Itself said, "Who will it be?"

and with charred lips he said, "Me,"

and Mystery said "Go."

Mystery said, "Go give the deaf hell till you're blue in the face and go show the blind heaven till you drop in your tracks, because they'd sooner eat ground glass than swallow the bitter pill that puts roses in the cheeks and a gleam in the eye. Go do it."

Isaiah said, "Do it till when?"

Mystery said, "Till hell freezes over."

Mystery said, "Do it till the cows come home."

And that is what a prophet does for a living and, starting from the year that King Uzziah died, when he saw and heard all these things, Isaiah went and did it. (Frederick Buechner, Originally published in *Peculiar Treasures*)

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In the book *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, author William Isaacs identifies three types of people and the "languages" they use to communicate. The first he calls "Feelers" and they are attuned to the tone of communication as much as the content. This is a language of *feeling* or the language of the heart. People who speak this language tend to see the world as a network of relationships, and are concerned for taking care of people and how they feel.

The second type -- the “Doers” -- are more attuned to strategy and results. Their language is one of *action* or of the body. They tend to lean toward doing, implementation and taking responsibility. Doers often see emotions and analysis as diversions, and want to get back to work as quickly as possible.

Finally, we have the “thinkers” -- those who speak with the language of *meaning* - - the language of the mind. Those who communicate this way tend to focus on values, theories, analysis and the implications of situations. “Thinkers” look for patterns and meaning, focusing on content and implication.

Of course we’re all a combination of body, mind and heart, right? Feeling, action, meaning -- we all use these languages, but we tend to use one more often than the others. This three-fold way of being human is part of what makes the doctrine of the Trinity so satisfying and helpful.

in the year that the good king Uzziah died, a grieving Isaiah entered the temple had a vision of God that changed his life forever. According to our text, this dramatic encounter with God transformed Isaiah into one of Israel’s greatest prophets.

The remarkable thing about this story is just how God’s work in Isaiah, and by extension God’s people, is revealed – and the way Isaiah is called to be an instrument of God, carrying God’s word and movement out into the world.

IN this vision, Isaiah’s first glimpse of God is one of grandeur, and glory, and the worship of the *seraphim* – the shining ones. and it seems to me that this vision is a communication to the nation, through Isaiah, opening them up to some important insights about reality. God is revealed as high and lifted up, enthroned and filling the temple with God’s glory.

The message is simple: kings may come and go, but God is the true monarch not only of Israel, but, as the *seraphim* sing, of the whole earth. With the death of King Ussiah, the future may be uncertain, for Isaiah and for Israel, but God remains sovereign -- to be trusted and worshipped, for security is found only in the Divine Ruler of God’s people.

The *seraphim* themselves reveal some things that Isaiah and his people needed to undrstnd. They are mystical creatures with six wings. Two wings cover their faces,

which indicates that their eyes and minds can't look upon on God's glory – they are incapable of fully comprehending the Divine Being (kind of like us!), so all they can do is offer themselves in devotion.

Then two wings cover their feet. Now, the word 'feet' in the Hebrew Bible is often used as a euphemism for the genitals. You may remember that Ruth, when she went to lie with Boaz, uncovered his feet. Thus, the part of us that's used to express love, intimacy and communion – shared feeling – is hidden, which reflects the transcendence of God -- the inaccessibility of the Divine Lover, who him/her/itself known anyway, inviting humanity into union with God.

Finally, two wings are used for flying. These heavenly beings are ready for *action*, ready to do God's bidding at a moment's notice. So the worship of the *seraphim* is also expressed in the language of the mind, and the heart and the body. Along with the threefold "Holy" which could possibly correspond to the three languages, the worship of the *seraphim* reached into every part of Isaiah, inviting him to join them in this worshipful experience with God.

But, it doesn't end there. Isaiah himself is caught up in God's threefold action within himself, and moved to respond, which turns him into a threefold instrument of God's Kingdom in this world. The first part of Isaiah that's touched is his heart. He feels grief and shame at his own uncleanness, while feeling the connection with his own unclean community at the same time. It's an intimate moment of personal as well as a shared community confession, revealing the depth of Isaiah's heart, causing him to cry out in the language of feeling, "Woe is me!"

Then, like a movie, boom! the the scene shifts to one of the *seraphim*. Presumably at God's command, the creature takes a burning coal out of the fire touches Isaia's mouth with it, explaining to Isaiah what's going on. The problem has been evaluated – the people are unclean and they need to be forgiven -- cleansed – and the solution is found in God's grace, represented by the altar, the place of sacrifice -- communion with god.

the seraph explains that the coal must be applied to Isaiah's lips – the communication center of his being The lips represent Isaiah's holistic self – the whole

human: the mind which decides how he lives, the heart which draws him toward or away from God, and the body which puts his beliefs and feelings into action.

Although all of Isaiah's being is drawn into this moment, the action of God is directed through the almost sacramental words spoken by the *seraph* – your sins are blotted out; forgiven, in other words.

Isaiah then hears God's voice speaking: a call to action: "Who will go for us?" After the way his heart and mind have been touched, Isaiah can't help but respond with his body, with the famous words: "Here I am. Send me."

God has revealed God's self to Isaiah in three ways, three "languages". His heart has been touched. His mind has been challenged -- and comforted, and his body has been called to action. The threefold "holy" of the *seraphim*, then, is also a celebration of the Triune God who communicates to Isaiah in the three basic languages that he needed to hear in order to be completely transformed.

The result of this encounter is dramatic. Isaiah becomes a great prophet, sent out to deliver God's word to the people of Israel. Although the verses that come after aren't included in today's reading, they reveal how Isaiah's ministry addressed the hearts, the minds, and the bodies of the people: v.10 "harden the hearts of these people", v 9 "Listen carefully...", and the actions in v 12 of "plugging ears," "shutting eyes" and the reference to people being "sent away." Like Divine Parent, like human child.

Now, Isaiah's experience isn't that uncommon for God's people, although maybe a tad bit more dramatic. Transforming encounters with God are always available to us, and they will always open us up to God's threefold communication, God's Triune Being.

It's no surprise that God is revealed to us as the Great "Designer" – the Creator of the universe, holding in God's "mind" the truths, the patterns and the meaning of the whole created order of everything (as God revealed to Job in that intense conversation).

It's no surprise that God is revealed as the Spirit who connects the cosmos, bringing order and community out of chaos, drawing all people, everywhere, into diverse and welcoming community (as in last week's Pentecost).

And it's no surprise that God is revealed in body as the incarnate Jesus, who communicates God's love through action – healing, loving, teaching, preaching, dying, rising...

The miracle is, as God meets us in these ways, our entire being is touched and transformed and we become true children of God, communicating God's wisdom, love and justice through our own languages of mind, heart and body. So, as we worship this Sunday, let's not lose ourselves in the dry, intellectualism of doctrine. Rather, let us enter the temple as thinking, feeling, embodied beings, ready to experience a God who meets us in every part of ourselves, speaking the languages of meaning, feeling and action. And let us respond, as the *seraph* did, with our whole beings in the threefold song of "holy, holy, holy".

I want to finish up today with a cool poem I found called,

"God's Bathrobe" by Michael Coffey

*God sat Sunday in her Adirondack deck chair
reading the New York Times and sipping strawberry lemonade
her pink robe flowing down to the ground*

*the garment hem was fluff and frill
and it spilled holiness down into the sanctuary
into the cup and the nostrils of the singing people*

*one thread trickled loveliness into a funeral rite
as the mourners looked in the face of death
and heard the story of a life truer than goodness*

*a torn piece of the robe's edge flopped onto
a war in southern Sudan and caused heartbeats
to skip and soldiers looked into themselves deeply*

*one threadbare strand of the divine belt
almost knocked over a polar bear floating
on a loose berg in the warming sea*

*one silky string wove its way through Jesus' cross
and tied itself to desert-parched immigrants with swollen tongues
and a woman with ovarian cancer and two young sons*

*you won't believe this, but a single hair-thin fiber
floated onto the yacht of a rich man and he gasped
when he saw everything as it really was*

*the hem fell to and fro across the universe
filling space and time and gaps between the sub-atomic world
with the effervescent presence of the one who is the is*

*and even in the slight space between lovers in bed
the holiness flows and wakes up the body
to feel beyond the feeling and know beyond the knowing*

*and even as we monotheize and trinitize
and speculate and doubt even our doubting
the threads of holiness trickle into our lives*

*and the seraphim keep singing "holy, holy, holy"
and flapping their wings like baby birds
and God says: give it a rest a while*

*and God takes another sip of her summertime drink
and smiles at the way you are [hearing] this filament now
and hums: It's a good day to be God*