

***“In the Presence . . . ”***

***“Woe is me!”*** Isaiah cries out. ***“Go away from me, Lord,”*** begs Peter.

Those are not exactly blissful responses. From one standing in the presence of the Lord, we would want to expect bliss to be the dominant motif. After all, again and again the Psalmists utter such words as: ***“Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!”*** (Psalm 4:6) ***“As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.”*** (Psalm 17:15) ***“‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek his face!’ Your face, Lord, do I seek.”*** (Psalm 27:8)

One begins to get the idea that looking on God, being where God is, longing to see God is something of a joyful experience. Indeed, one of the foremost tasks in Formational Prayer is to teach people to find a “safe place” where they can encounter the living Christ. But how can that place be safe if being there leads to such reactions as, ***“Woe is me!”*** and, ***“Depart from me, Lord!”***?

Are Isaiah’s and Peter’s reactions aberrations? Is there something unique to them that leads to these responses? Or are those other reactions of longing, desire, and solicitude the exception.? I happened upon an old edition of The Concordia Journal, the scholarly publication of my Alma Mater, Concordia Theological Seminary in St. Louis. I was perusing a few of the articles and this statement caught my attention: ***“When God pronounced the curse to Moses that he could not look on him and live [Exodus 33:20] . . . ”*** I thought to myself: ***“I’ve never considered that a ‘curse’.”*** A warning, maybe . . . or simply a statement of reality . . .but surely not a curse. God is simply telling Moses that to experience God’s presence in such magnitude would be overwhelming, fatally overwhelming. Yet it does bring up the important issue of how the Psalmists can express their longing to see God’s face and the reality that seeing God’s face would be fatal.

Werner Elert once wrote: ***“Every encounter with Jesus Christ is an***

*encounter with our own sinfulness.*” What Elert meant by that is that the perfection of Jesus is so obvious that we know ourselves immediately to be sinners whenever we compare ourselves to Him.

I think this is what is happening both with Peter and with Isaiah. No, I don’t just “think” that; the texts tell me this is the case. Isaiah yells out ***“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips . . .”*** This was spoken by a man who had never seen a Bruce Willis movie or listened to a single recording by any gangsta hi-hop “artist” — WE ***“ . . . live among a people of unclean lips . . .”*** And Peter cries out, ***“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”*** Both of them know what is going on here. They are in the presence of God and are made deathly afraid by the awareness of their own sinfulness.

Can we say the same? Are we distressed to be in God’s presence? Does our sinfulness matter to us? Or have we become so jaded that we simply do not have an awareness of being in God’s presence? Can you say that right now you have a profound sense that God is at hand? What, if anything, does that knowledge do to you? I fear for myself that I am not all that aware when God is present. I often feel like Jacob when he awoke from his dream of the ladder running between earth and heaven. He said, ***“Surely the Lord was in this place and I did not know it.”***

Being unaware of God’s presence makes me less than awe-filled. I need to be awe-filled. You need to be awe-filled. We need an awareness of something that is so much greater than we, something to which we can pin our hopes, something that will fulfill our longings. Your God Is Too Small ran the title of a book by J.B. Phillips. He was absolutely right; for most of us, our God is too small.

But, does God want us to be afraid of him, or of being in his presence? Does He want us off in the corner cowering? No! How do we know that? We see the incarnation has changed everything. To be sure, Peter was caught off-guard by the miracle catch of fish, and his response was one of shock that gave rise to fear. But Peter was reassured in an instant: ***“Do***

***not be afraid . . .***

Except that Jesus went on to say something that seems to send us into shock that gives rise to fear: “. . . ***from now on you will be catching people.***” We don’t fall to our knees as Peter did (although maybe we ought to do that a little more often); instead, we become virtually paralyzed, pretending we didn’t hear what Jesus has to say, and we walk on.

I think I know why the idea of people-fishing (okay, let’s use the real fear-word: “witnessing”) is so scary to so many people. The usual excuse is: “*I don’t know what to say.*” Or another frequently expressed concern, “*What if they ask a question and I don’t know the answer?*” The reason why many people don’t know what to say is because they have not been aware of a genuine experience of being in the presence of God. If you have experienced the genuine presence of God, you could not wait to tell others about it.

So what do you fear? Peter was afraid because of his sinfulness (more on that anon); Isaiah was afraid because of his own sinfulness and the sins of his people. Listen for God’s sense of humor in this: Isaiah wails “. . . ***I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips . . .***” so what does God do? He cleans his lips. “***Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’***”

Does this fall under the category, “watch out what you pray for because you just might get it”? No, it falls under the category of God always meeting us where we are, not where we think we ought to be. I fear that many Christians have put off a lively encounter with God because deep down inside they are convinced that, if God were to meet them, God would be disappointed. So they tell themselves that they will get their act together; they’re going to “shape up.” Except you cannot shape up, or measure up, or even get up off your knees — on your own.

Here is the truth: You don't measure up; you're in lousy shape (and I don't mean your beer belly or sagging triceps); there is no self-improvement coming. That does not matter. That's what the message to both Isaiah and Peter tells us: God doesn't concern himself with whether or not you measure up.

God loves you, and out of that love He does what you need to have done, but cannot do. He touches Isaiah's lips with purifying heat; and He simply ignores Peter's declaration: He's not going anywhere, so forget "**Depart from me,**" that ain't gonna happen. Note, Jesus does not say to Peter "*Oh, you are a sinful man, are you? That's nice.*" It's not "nice," it's awful. It is good that Peter recognizes it. Jesus simply tells Peter to stop being afraid. Now how hard can that be?

You ever been really scared of something? I used to be panic-stricken by the prospect of driving over a bridge. There was a time when driving across the Valley View Bridge on 480 would have left me like a puddle — white knuckles, shakes, sweating. It was so bad that, if I knew a bridge was coming, I would stop the car, switch places with Kristine, let her drive over the bridge, and then stop and switch places back. "**Don't be afraid?**" Yeah, Jesus, easy for you to say.

But Peter wasn't afraid anymore. That's amazing. What got him unafraid? It was being in the presence of Jesus. Hubert Beck wrote of this encounter between Jesus and Peter: "*Peter's sinfulness was not to be a cause of separation from Jesus. Rather, Jesus' receptive grace was to be the entry point for Peter into a life that was to separate him from all the fear that had filled him at this early encounter with this man. It was not an entry point into a life that would never know fear-filled moments, but it was an entry point into a life that needed not fear those moments for one whose very presence itself was larger than all the fears that the world could hurl at him.*"

That's what being in God's presence does for those of who come into His presence in Christ. The fear has been taken away. We come without having to pass some standardized test. We come without having to wear

“the right clothing.” We are clothed in Christ in our Baptisms, and His righteousness is all we need.

So once again today we are invited into the presence. Christ once again comes to meet us where we are. Here in bread and wine, here through Word, here in the fellowship of fellow-sinners who are also fellow-redeemed, Jesus brings His presence — His sinless, flesh-and-blood, loving, accepting, equipping, empowering presence.

A Sunday School teacher challenged her children to take some time on Sunday afternoon to write a letter to God. They were to bring their letter back the following Sunday. One little boy wrote, “*Dear God. We had a good time at church today. Wish you could have been there.*” I pray today that no person — man, woman or child — ever again leaves this place thinking, “*I wish God could have been there.*” He IS here. Be still and know that, not only is he God, but the God who comes to us.

Amen.