Seeing God's Presence in the world
Fellowship of Hope
Year B, June 7, 2009
Isaiah 6.1-8; Psalm 29; John 3.1-17

For many of us, if asked what we see in our world, we are likely to begin with a litany that might include the following—the war in Iraq and in Afghanistan; poverty and starvation and disease that kills thousands; peoples and countries devastated by the violence of civil war and the raping of women and refugees streaming from their homes; the greed and excess in politics and business. We would of course also see the global church, and notice that it's growing in numbers... growth hard for us to imagine as we watch our own numbers steadily declining. We see the systemic poverty and injustice in our own communities and we work for justice in its many forms and faces. But sometimes it seems that the more we work, the more injustice we see. We don't seem to be able to make a dent or a difference.

I have a sense that what we see in our world today is the same thing every century, every generation sees. It's what Isaiah saw thousands of years ago. The first 5 chapters of Isaiah are his visions of Judah and Jerusalem...he writes in v 4 of the first chapter, "Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity." Isaiah describes a people who enjoy wealth and power... while the widows and orphans remain neglected. These 5 chapters *see* the injustices in the world around him, visions of God's justice and judgment...God's justice inseparable from God's judgment. Because the least in their communities aren't being cared for...there is judgment...the sure companion to justice.

To be sure, the Hebrew people are still worshiping. But God sees the abuses of power and wealth... the pain and suffering in the community... and God wants nothing to do with their worship. Their own sin judges them. In chapter 3 v 8 Isaiah describes their sin: "For Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are *against* YHWH, defying God's *glorious presence*." Again in chapter 5 v 12, "[they] do not *regard*

the deeds of YHWH, or *see* the work of God's hands." I confess, when I look at the world around me, I see all the ugliness of brokenness and pain and violence... I don't see God's Beauty; I don't see glorious Presence. When I think about what I see, I do so justifying my own life...listing all the things I am doing...all the ways I am following God's Word and will in the world. I want God to judge injustice... but I want God to judge others, not me...not us. I don't want to be held responsible for the injustices in this community and in the world around me. Surely God accepts my worship... surely it is not our worship that God rejects. When the churches in the global south... the churches that are growing by leaps and bounds... when they look at the world, I wonder what they see? Do they see God's robe filling their Temple, filling their lives and their world? Is that why people are streaming into their congregations?

Then we come to our Text for today in chapter 6, a passage known as Isaiah's call.... These verses are an account of Isaiah *seeing* God. The setting is worship, with God's flowing robes... and smoke from the altar of God... *filling* the Temple. You can almost smell the incense and feel the touch and softness of the robe.... God's Presence fills the Temple... permeating all Its spaces. Six seraphim are serving God, and when they speak their praise, their voices fill the Temple...with a fullness that causes It to tremble. "Holy, holy, holy is Mighty YHWH; the whole earth is full of God's glory." Just as God's Presence fills and pervades the Temple, so God's Presence fills and pervades the whole earth. In his worship, Isaiah *sees* God's Presence... and *visions* God's Presence in every land, in all lands.

But in the ancient world, people can't see God and live, Isaiah knows this: we hear his Oy me! A translation from the Septuagint reads, "I have been pierced." The price for seeing God is high. But Isaiah continues...with a confession. "I am a [person] of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips." His unclean lips refer to his ritual impurity—

not impurity as immorality as we want to think of it in our context...or impurity because he didn't follow the Law—but impurity in the sense that he is not *ready* to see God, to encounter God. Hebrew purity laws are explicit...one doesn't meander into the presence of God without being made ready! This confession is a recognition of his humanity. His confession recognizes *who* God is... that it is God who is King... it is YHWH God...not any other god...and not Isaiah... but God of Hosts who rules and governs... in the Temple *and* in the world.

And so here is Isaiah...in the middle of worship...having *seen* God...in spite of his readiness...in spite of any preparedness on his part. And the response? In v 6 a seraph comes to him with a live coal taken from the altar and touches his lips, saying: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt is *turned aside* and your sin is *atoned."* With the touch of a live coal from the Temple's altar, he is cleansed...saved...healed...made whole. And when God asks, without hesitation Isaiah answers, I'm ready. Send me.

Isaiah is ready to *be* and to *do* the work of God in the world. His readiness to give physicality to God's Presence in the world is not something Isaiah does for himself, or even asks for. His cleansing...his being saved...made ready is a gift given to him...in response to his confession...as a result of having seen God's Presence. Hebrew purity laws haven't diminished... for our God is not and cannot be limited or confined by that which is human.... Our God is pervasively present, working with and through the physicality and materiality of human laws and beyond... beyond the limits of our comprehension and knowing... God's wisdom and power are at work in the touch of a live coal. It began with Isaiah *seeing* God's glorious presence... it begins with *our* seeing God's Presence... seeing God's glory filling our worship...seeing God's pervasive presence filling our world.

The Text in John 3 looks and sounds different, but that God is seen and encountered

by Nicodemus as with Isaiah is clear. The story in John begins with Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night. Maybe it was actually at night, but maybe night is more than about the time of day. Listen to several other places where John talks about the night:

> John 11:10 But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.
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> 13:30 *Writing about Judas who was about to give Jesus to the authorities:* So, after receiving the piece of bread, [Judas] immediately went out. And it was night.
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> 19:39 A*t Jesus' burial:* Nicodemus, w*ho had at first come to Jesus by night*, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes...
>
> Revelation 21:25 *On the New Jerusalem:* Its gates will never be shut by day-- and there will be no night there.

We should also note the opening verses of this gospel, chapter 1 v 5, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." This Light is God's Word... present at creation... made-flesh in Jesus. That Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night suggests, perhaps, that night is the place where the Light is not...is not *yet*. Or maybe...night is our experience of God's absence. In our night, we don't *see* the Light...we don't *see* the presence of God filling the earth, imbuing all places and spaces.

Nicodemus *saw* the Light, saw the Light of God's Presence in Jesus and comes to Jesus...in the night. He begins the conversation with a statement. One would think he'd ask a question, and maybe he means to. But what he says is, "Rabbi, God's Presence must be with you. It's the only explanation for the power of your ministry." To which Jesus responds: "You're absolutely right... if not born from above one is unable to *see* the kingdom of God." Notice that Jesus equates, or immediately relates and connects God's Presence with *seeing* the Kingdom of God.

Listen again to the exchange: "Rabbi, God's Presence must be with you." And Jesus affirms, "yes, if not born from above one is *unable* to see the kingdom of God." In this affirmation we hear Jesus saying, "Yes, I am born from above so I am able to see the

Kingdom of God. God's Presence is with me."

Nicodemus then asks his first question, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb?" Now, if you're like me you're thinking...this *is* a bad question! But it's a reasonable question... if Jesus is born from above, how can he, Nicodemus, also be born from above...also experience God's Presence. And if we put ourselves in Nicodemus' shoes, understanding that he's a Pharisee and a leader... someone who knows Hebrew Scriptures and law...his question makes even more sense. The language of being-born-from-above is not the language of Hebrew Scripture; it's not the language of their cult or culture. Jesus is saying something new—*we* know this language so well that for some of us it's lost its meaning—but for Nicodemus, its newness made it difficult to understand. And actually, it's *still* difficult to understand. Jesus continues: "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, '*It is necessary for all of you to* be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

John's writing and Jesus' words are *filled* with nuance and multiple meanings. In v 7 it appears that Jesus is repeating and quoting what he said earlier in vv 3 and 5. But he isn't. In v 7, the "you" is plural.." It is necessary for *all of you to* be born from above." But in vv 3 and 5 the person is singular, some "one." The double meanings continues. Being born from above, in Greek, can also read or mean "be born anew." Being born from above is a re-birth, a spiritual birth... above not in a literal sense of up, but a being-made-new by God... like having our lips touched with a live coal from the altar of God's Temple. This being born anew is the work of God who is Divine Mystery...we are recipients... recipients of an event...of the breath of the Spirit that we cannot fully know or understand. This birth from

on high moves from flesh and material to spiritual and heavenly; the God who gives us this new birth...this new life...is a God who dwells in the material and spiritual... a Triune God...not limited by divinity... but dwelling in the flesh and humanity of Jesus... at home in the breath of the Spirit... and present in all the spaces in-between.

Jesus explains, in v 8, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Notice that Jesus is using the physical, the material world to explain the spiritual, the heavenly. The wind blows where it is intended to blow... and we physically experience its results. In the same way, "The Spirit spirits where it is intended." We cannot see wind itself...and we can't see or know the beginning of the Spirit breathing.... but we know...in our hearts more than in our heads... that the Spirit of God present at creation, breathing and blowing over the waters...continues to breath and blow...the Spirit of God fills the earth...*breaths* our world...breathes our being and we *can* see and experience its re-newing, its Presence...its life-from-above-giving Presence.

The Triune God is greater and more than the number 3... the magnitude and complexity of God[1] are evident in this John Text. We can understand Jesus' words for a moment... but as soon as we try to hold onto them... to explain and intellectualize them... they slip through our hands. In these verses, God's Presence and the ability to see God's Kingdom and our new life from above are interwoven and interdependent. The Triune God, in the form of Jesus... descended from above... is the Source of this seeing and new life. ... And in vv 14 and 15 we hear that it is our *faith* in Jesus, in God's Word-made-Flesh... our *trust* in Jesus, the Light that shines in the darkness...that gives us our seeing, our new life, our abundant life...our life that cannot be limited. Jesus explains...tries to explain...that it works

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[1] Marjorie Suchocki, *God-Christ-Church*.

the same way the serpent in the wilderness worked. You remember the story...the people were dying from snake bites so Moses made a bronze serpent and lifted it up on a pole. When people were bitten, they would look up at the bronze serpent and live... the poison made powerless. In the same way Jesus must be lifted up...looked at...seen...so that the poison in our world, the pain and brokenness and violence is powerless in its effect on us.

When our eyes are on Jesus... the one who came down and ascended again into the clouds... we experience eternal life in spite of being bitten by life. I have a sense that the churches in the global south are looking at Jesus...seeing God's glorious Presence... and experiencing eternal life, unbound life in ways that are hard for us to imagine. When we look at Jesus...we experience God's Presence—the same Presence that Nicodemus recognized in Jesus...the same Presence Isaiah saw filling the Temple. When we look at Jesus...we are born from above...and can *see* the Kingdom of God. When we look at Jesus...we are saved... our lips are touched with a live coal...our sins covered...atoned. When we look at Jesus...in the parted clouds at God's right hand...we are delivered from the things that break us. In v 17 Jesus says he came to save the world...to heal... He didn't come to rule or judge, but to deliver us... to free us from that which binds us. We look to Jesus to be saved...healed...made whole...as individuals...and communities.

We are a people of unclean lips but God has chosen us to see God's Presence... has touched our lips... has made us ready to experience the Beauty of God's glorious Presence.