Sunday, May 21, 1989
AN OVERWHELMING EXPERIENCE OF GOD
Isaiah 6:1-8

In this reading from the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah is attempting to describe an overwhelming experience of the presence of God that changed his life.

Unlike Isaiah, most of us don't talk very much about our deep and life-changing spiritual experiences — those times when we have truly felt God's power within us and all around us. Some of us are even a little embarrassed about such encounters with the "holy." We're not always sure what they mean. Or we may have a powerful experience of the presence of God, but we're not clear what to do about it, if anything. Sometimes these experiences of the presence of God can come when we least expect them, and at other times they happen as a result of an expressed deep need when our lives seem to be falling apart.

Some of you may have watched the television movie several Sunday nights ago about the life of Bill W., one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. He had an experience of God's presence that changed the direction of his life. It was briefly shown in the movie but is more completely described in the book that contains the story of his life entitled, BILL W.

Bill was in a hospital again because of his excessive drinking. This was not the worst drunk he'd been on, and after a few days of sedatives and a massive quantity of vitamins, his physical being seemed restored. His mind cleared, but as the boozy fog lifted, a great black depression, the worst one of his life, gradually settled over him.

Now, alone in the tiny room, he saw that he was reacting to everything not as a man of thirty-nine, but as a maimed, dull child. On his second evening there, his friend Ebby stopped by for a visit, and after a little general talk, Ebby again repeated his pat formula about realizing you were licked, admitting it, and being willing to turn your life over to the care of God. Bill nodded. He was so lost he was willing to believe almost anything.

When Ebby left, Bill did not get up from the side of the bed or make any move toward seeing him out. He sat with the passivity of a six-year-old who knows he has done wrong but cannot understand what he is supposed to do.

He knew that tomorrow or the next day he would have to leave the hospital again, and at this thought, a sudden chill would sweep over him; his whole body would be covered with a cold sweat. He could not go home. Out there were three choices. Only three. He could stop drinking, or he would go insane, or he would die.

Alone, lost, and terrified, he saw no place to turn. He needed someone, something to tell him what to do, someone to take care of him. Finally, unable to stay on the bed, unwilling to go down the hall and join the others, he began to pace the tiny room, from the bed to the door, from the door to the bed. He would do anything, anything now. But what was there to do?

He stopped by the foot of the bed — he was hopeless. This was his ending. He would die. Still, he would not, could not accept the word because in some far corner of his being, he did not want to die. In spite of the terror, in spite of the agony, the strain, and the unending tumult, he wanted life more than he wanted an end to the striving. He wanted to live.

His hands clasped the footboard of the bed. But how? How? His fingers relaxed a little on the footboard; his arms slowly reached out and up. “I want,” he said aloud, “I want...”

“Oh God,” he cried.

As he formed the words, in that very instant, he was aware first of a light, a great white light that filled the room. Then he suddenly seemed caught up in a kind of joy, an ecstasy such as he would never find words to describe. It was as though he were standing high on a mountaintop and a strong, clear wind blew against him, around him, through him, but it seemed a wind not of air, but of spirit — and as this happened, he had the feeling that he was stepping into another world, a new world of consciousness, and everywhere now there was a wondrous feeling of Presence, which all his life he had been seeking. Nowhere had he ever felt so complete, so satisfied, so embraced.

And it happened as suddenly and as definitely as one might receive a shock from an electrode or feel heat when a hand is passed close to a flame. Then, when it passed, when the light slowly dimmed, and the ecstasy subsided — and whether this was a matter of minutes or much longer, he never knew; he was beyond any reckoning of time — the sense of Presence was still there about him, within him. And with it, there was another sense, a sense of rightness. No matter how wrong things seemed to be, they were as they were meant to be.

The cosmos was not dead matter but a part of the living Presence, just as he was part of it. Now in place of the light, the exaltation, he was filled with a peace such as he had never known. Bill had heard people say that there was a bit of God in everyone, but this feeling that he was a part of God, a living part of the higher power, was a new and revolutionary feeling.

And it was a feeling that he wanted to hang on to now, to whatever it was that had happened; he wanted only to feel it.

Later, Bill remembered an old saying—"When the pupil is ready, the teacher appears.”

Unlike Bill W., we don’t know what happened to Isaiah before he entered the temple and had the overwhelming experience of the presence, power, and holiness of God. We don’t know if Isaiah was at the end of his rope or whether he was there for a regular worship service, as was his habit. But like Bill W., Isaiah was probably not expecting anything unusual to take place.

Whatever the case, Isaiah, like countless other people, had an overwhelming experience of God that changed his life. He, of course, describes it using imagery that was appropriate for the culture in which he lived, whereas we may feel more comfortable with the imagery of someone like Bill W.

Let’s look now at Isaiah’s overwhelming experience of God in more detail because it outlines a sequence of events common to many who experience God, and it is no accident, therefore, that it forms a broad outline of what takes place in worship services like this one.

Whenever Isaiah entered the temple, he was reminded of God’s presence. I hope this is your experience when you enter this place. It is not because God’s presence can only be experienced in a place set aside for worship, but precisely because it is the setting for regular worship that we are reminded that God is present within us and everywhere throughout the cosmos.

Isaiah put it this way: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and His train 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.”

Like Isaiah, when we come here on a Sunday morning, our thoughts are more focused on God, first by the fact that we are taking time out of our busy schedules to be reminded of God’s presence, then by the majesty of the building itself, and by the opening music, the opening hymn, and the call to worship. Through these actions and in this place, hopefully, we will experience something of the presence and holiness of God. It may not always be as spectacular as Isaiah describes or as life-changing as what happened to both Isaiah and Bill W., but the experience is valid nevertheless.

Once we have become freshly aware of God’s presence, then like Isaiah, we also are more conscious of our need for forgiveness. That’s why in our order of worship, we have a prayer of confession that we say in unison.

Listen to Isaiah’s imagery again: “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!'”

Next, like Isaiah, we are ready now to hear the good news that God continually and unconditionally forgives us, and because of that, we sing a song of praise and thanksgiving. The choir then frequently follows with another song of praise sung on our behalf.

Here’s Isaiah’s description of the experience of being forgiven: “Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal, which 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 forgiven.’ And I heard the voice of God saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I. Send me.'”

Having been forgiven and having praised God, Isaiah was now ready to hear God’s word and to resolve again to follow God’s will. In our worship services, this includes the reading of the scripture, the sermon, the time of prayers, the offering, the closing hymn, the benediction, and the music that follows.

Overwhelming experiences of God’s power and presence within us and all around are often few and far between for each one of us. And if you have never had that kind, that does not mean that God is absent from your life. Some of us have a number of smaller, less earth-shaking ones. That’s been my pattern.

Instead of one life-changing spiritual experience, I’ve found my life changing more gradually over the years. And that’s valid too. How about you? Amen.