



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Blessed Affliction”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Isaiah 6: 1-8

July 10, 2016

So, how would you define a Christian? What is it that makes someone a Christian? One of the classic youth/confirmation activities I have done with groups over the years is to give them a big sheet of paper and have them draw a picture of a Christian – a visible representation of their own sense and definition of what makes a person a Christian. They start drawing and you find that there might be cross hanging around the neck, a Bible in their hands, an extra-big heart to show how much they love people, perhaps some food or other means of assistance that the person is extending to others, and on and on. It’s interesting to see how kids come up with ways to represent their understanding of our faith, and it’s fascinating to look at what it is, for them, that defines being a Christian.

But, what is it for you? Is it trust and belief in Jesus as Savior? Is it a life of virtue and service? Is it a close and personal relationship with Christ? Is it behavior? Relationship? Doctrine? Understanding? What it is that defines the core essence and nature of being a Christian? There are a lot of ways you can look at it – and all sorts of understandings that people bring to the core essence of our faith. But, for me, there are few places we can better understand the very essence of what it means to be a Christian than we have in Isaiah 6. For me, Isaiah 6 is the very epitome of the Christian condition – the blessed affliction of our status in the eyes and presence of God.

I think we often tend to know this passage VERY well, and the song has so much meaning to many of us, but I think that familiarity often tends to point us to the end of the story without sufficient reflection on the path that brought us to that end. I want you to imagine this circumstance. Isaiah says that he finds himself (by vision, or revelation, or some other manifestation) in the presence of God. I get this image of this cavernous room or temple with dark walls, no windows, and all of the light of the room emanating from this one spot high above in the front, where Isaiah sees the manifestation of God himself seated on a throne above him.

Swirling around the room are these seraphs – angelic beings present to do the work and bidding of God. They cover their hands and feet in acts of humility and self-preservation and call out of the glory and wonder of God. But, then Isaiah has this sudden realization. He doesn’t have a pair of wings to cover his face from the awe-inspiring vision of God. He doesn’t have wings to

cloak his feet and shade away the markings of his wayward journeys. No, Isaiah is bare and uncompromised as he stands in the very presence of God – with the Lord there to see it all! And that, my friends, is the moment I think we all too often miss.

Imagine standing in the very presence of God feeling as though you were about to have to account for everything you've done. I dare to say that your focus is not going to be on that time you helped that homeless man find food or those years you spent making casseroles for St. Ben's. No, if you are suddenly face to face with the very glory of God your mind is going to start reeling as you mentally replay every misstep, side-track, slip-up, blunder, bungle, error, gaffe, mistake and dare I use the word 'sin' you have committed along the way. And, that's exactly what happens to Isaiah.

I think we lose a little bit in translation here. 'Woe is me,' doesn't exactly give us the sense of fright and urgency that I think were present in this moment for Isaiah. But, the reality is that I think the words that could actually properly express Isaiah's true reaction are words that I am not going to use in the pulpit. So, suffice it to say that Isaiah was scared out of his gourd here. Isaiah was terrified. He was standing in the very presence of God, in a room so holy that even the holiest of God's angels were covering their hands and their feet, and here Isaiah stands feeling as though he is wearing placards describing every shortfall and mistake of his life on every inch of his body. And, again, we lose a bit in translation here, but his conclusion is simple – 'I'm done!'

What else is he to assume here? What is Isaiah to make of his circumstance of standing sinful before God than to simply assume that God's wrath and judgement are about to be thrust upon him for his iniquities? He assumes that he's in for it – that his life is over and that his damnation is upon. And then, thrusting towards him, is one of these seraphs, and you know he was shaking in his boots. Isaiah must assume that this is the moment of his damnation, but instead, out comes this burning coal taken from the very altar that stood at the foot of God, and it is touched to Isaiah's lips. 'Now that this has touched your lips,' Isaiah hears, 'your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.'

Does that sound familiar? Do you see the parallel of our faith here? That, right there, that moment of the coal touching the lips of Isaiah – that's the Christ moment. That's the salvation that stands at the core of our faith – that is the Christian Condition, the affliction of our frail humanity blessed and blotted out by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The reason the hymn has served such a meaningful role in my life is that I think we are all Isaiah! I think the essence of being a Christian is the core of this story told by Isaiah. We are the ones that who have strayed. We are the one who have made bad decisions, mistakes, missteps and misguided choices repeatedly along the way of this journey we call life. We are the ones who have, do, and will again fall away from that which God has called us to do and be in our lives. That is the simple reality of our human condition.

And, we are the ones who have stood at risk of baring each and every one of those shortfalls before God. We are the ones who could, and should, have been in Isaiah's very place, standing before the glory and wonder of God, suddenly painfully and frighteningly aware of all we have

done to fall short – only to realize that none of that matters, because the love of God, made known to us in the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, has erased it all. Jesus is the coal that has touched our lips. The gift of Christ is that which has blotted out our sin and cast away our guilt – and we stand before God holy and sanctified because of the grace-filled actions of His son. And it's then, and not until then, that God calls out, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" It is in response, in reaction, as an offering of thanksgiving for that which we have received that we are called to service. And, it is that, I suggest, that is the true mark of what it means to be a Christian.

I may have shared with some of you, before, the story of a member of my childhood church who stood to ask a question during the Q&A portion of my ordination Council. He asked a question about religious pluralism – how I viewed the relation of my faith, and Christianity as whole, in relation to other faiths and religious expressions. In response, I spoke a little of my views on the question, and then he responded to my comments at one point by saying, "I ask, because I have always felt that my Jewish neighbor is just as good a Christian as I am."

That's a statement that has echoed in my mind so many times over the years. "My Jewish neighbor is just as good a Christian as I am." No. No, he's not! He may be just as good a person as you are (maybe even better). He may be just as religiously devoted a person as you are (maybe even more so). He may be the most selfless, giving, charitable, loving, nurturing, caring, serving, forgiving, uplifting, inspiring, helping person you have ever met in this world. He may be just shy of Christ himself in living the moral and selfless life. But, none of that, none of it, has anything to do with being a Christian!

As Christians we are called to be and do all of those things. As Christians, God calls out to us and says, 'Whom shall I send.' And, hopefully, as Christians, we are replying with our proclamation of 'Here I am, send me.' But, that proclamation, for us, is coming from a certain place. That call comes out, and we respond, in the wake of the Christ moment – it comes as a response to the gift of grace, love and mercy that God has written for us on the cross. It comes because we know there is nothing we could ever do to merit, earn or deserve that which we have been given, and thus we live every moment in light of, and service to, the one who has gained it for us. That, my friends, is the Isaiah story, it is the Christian story, and it is the very faith that we live.

You are Isaiah – you are the one that has strayed. You are the one who has made bad decisions, mistakes, missteps and misguided choices repeatedly along the way of this journey we call life. You are the one who has, does, and will again fall away from that which God has called us to do and be in our lives. That is the simple reality of our human condition.

And, you are the one who has stood at risk of baring each and every one of those things before God. You are the one who could, and should, have been in Isaiah's very place, standing before the glory and wonder of God, suddenly painfully and frighteningly aware of all you have done to fall short – only to realize that none of that matters, because the love of God, made known to us in the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, has erased it all. You are the one to know that Jesus is the coal that has touched your lips and cast away your guilt.

And, now, you are the one to whom God is calling. It may be to service, to study, to leadership, to mission, to any of a thousand things – but you are the one standing holy and sanctified before God as God is calling out ‘Whom shall I send, who will go for us?’ The core essence of our faith is the grace we have received that has brought us to that very point. The core question of our faith, however, is what you will say in response.