

Isaiah 6: 1-8 "A Grand, Inclusive God" Rev. Janet Chapman 5/27/18

This time last week, everyone was raving about the Royal Wedding, how it reflected a new generation, a new era for the monarchy that included a Gospel choir, lots of children, an unusual processional, and an outspoken African American Episcopal bishop giving the message, someone who incidentally is working in partnership with our church leaders to speak out against marginalization of the poor and propagation of lies which are unraveling the moral fabric of our society. He was an unusual choice, to say the least. The wedding veil was also unusual as every one of the hand-embroidered flowers on the five meter long trim was unique, reflecting the flora of 53 different commonwealth nations formerly ruled by Britain. Plus there was the beloved California poppy representing Meghan's home state, so we felt a part as well.

The veil was so grand, it seemed to encompass the whole room and I was transported for a moment to our scripture for today. Isaiah's vision speaks of the hem of God's robe filling up the entire temple; it is regal and sweeping touching everywhere one can see. With the six-winged creatures, shaking foundations, and visual effects galore, it is an image meant to inspire awe and wonder among a people who believed that no one could see God and live. With all the power and majesty of the vision, the voice of the Lord calls out wondering where help can be found. How small must Isaiah have been standing there in the temple, maybe hiding under one of the folds of God's robes, trying to find the courage to respond? The text indicates this is an earthly vision, not a heavenly one, as God's robes spread out and encompass whatever can be seen. For the prophet, God is all powerful and mighty while humans are small and sinful.

This is one view among many in scripture which reflects God's character, but I would challenge that the view is incomplete. Just as the intricacies and meaning of the royal veil were lost on those of us who saw it from afar, so it is with us. We need to draw closer and learn

more of God's intricacies to expand our understanding and mature in faith. Every Sunday I remind us that part of the purpose of worship is for us to draw closer in relationship to God, but it didn't used to be that way – it used to be worship was all about naming our separation from God, about proclaiming our sinfulness in relation to the perfection of God, even about shaming and prompting people towards all forms of violence in order to defend the Christian faith.

This is changing, according to Brian McLaren, as we come to understand more about Jesus and what he sought to teach us about God. Our vision of God through Isaiah's eyes definitely changes when we bring Jesus into the equation. In order to see what I am saying, it is helpful to first acknowledge that we go through faith stages in our relationship with God (McLaren, The Great Spiritual Migration). The first stage is motivated by the self, very much like being a baby cared for by its parents. God is, to us, the one who comes when called, cleans up our messes, satisfies our demands, kisses our scrapes and bruises, and keeps us as happy as possible. This is a very basic and simplistic relationship with God – God is the parent, we are the child. To the degree that caring adults faithfully came to our aid when we cried or were in need, we developed a trust in a loving, faithful God who would take care of us as we made our way through life. As we grow in faith, we discover this concept called "sharing" where we are invited to share what is ours with another. In this second stage relationship, God's job is still to clean up our messes and satisfy our demands, but God also has the tough job of calling us beyond our selfishness to generosity. In short, God asks us to be nice and polite to others, say please and thank you, play well with others, and this is progress from that selfish mode we used to reside in. As we grow older and wiser, we enter a new world of rules and schedules – there are rules for every part of living and punishments for those who break the rules. When we see

God from this faith stage, God is the keeper of rules and fair play whose job it is to reward those who obey and punish those who do not. Like growth rings on a tree, this stage embraces the previous rings from years gone by and incorporates them into something new. Our view of God is now embodied in authority figures outside the home who make themselves known in a world full of written and unwritten rules. Then, maybe several years later, love for another person outside our immediate family enters the picture and we learn that such love comes with the risk of pain. And still, we take the risk. We begin to anticipate how our actions will impact our significant other, we learn the art of sacrifice, the grace of granting forgiveness, and the humility of asking for forgiveness. There are no simple rules for this new territory, so we need a new concept of God to guide us beyond the simplicity of rule keeping. At this stage, the God of affection, fidelity, forgiveness and family comes into view. With God's help, we learn the adult commitments of service, teamwork, sacrifice, professional growth, handling money, dealing with conflict, of citizenship, and of social responsibility. At the time of our death, we look back on our life with gratitude and usually surrender our space on this earth to make room for someone else. We entrust ourselves to the loving presence of God, in whom we understand more deeply because of our progressive stages and experiences in living.

It all sounds good and well until we get stuck on an earlier understanding of God, until we fail to grow and mature. Many of us are still angry and bitter that our earliest version of God hasn't solved all our problems yet, hasn't made our lives as cozy as a warm blanket and a dry diaper. The truth is that most atheists and agnostics gave up on God because they never quite grew past this self-orienting expectation. Meanwhile, for some others, all they can handle is a gracious God who wants everything to be nice and everybody to get along. There

are still others who get stuck holding tightly to a world defined by rules and a God of law that everybody should adhere to. Then there are a few who have journeyed to that vision of a loving God who advocates for the common good, and they hope everyone else will get to that level as well. I wonder what your vision of God is these days? It matters because it defines how we read our text today, what we believe the God of Isaiah's vision is asking of us? A God of selfish preoccupation would be calling you to improve your life, take care of yourself; a God of generosity would be calling you to share with others; a God of rules would be calling you to teach the value of rules above all else; and a God of love would be inviting you to love those around you.

Some of you might have picked up that there is one more perspective still to be explored. There is a grander, more inclusive understanding of God which takes loving family and nation a step deeper to loving all people, neighbor and stranger, near and far, and all means all. This God is not bound by exclusions which have been so deeply ingrained in humanity. This view of God does not use terminology like us and them, but instead speaks of a God not just of us, but of **all** of us. This "grown-up" God, as scholars have stated, unites **all of us** in an inclusive identity that is not limited to tribe or nation, but extends to all of humanity, all living things, and all planetary ecosystems in which we share. Jacqueline Lewis says that for the sake of our world, we need to migrate to this "grown-up God." Embracing an understanding of a "grown-up" God will lead us away from the precipice of cataclysmic war, will save us from the paralyzing polarization we are seeing in our nation and world, and will teach us to wisely revere and care for the earth upon which we all depend. Focusing upon a "grown-up" God means we embrace the reality that we are all part of one family, one web of life. This is the perception

that most adequately reflects Jesus' teachings and mission on earth. The next time you hear someone say, "God is this or that" try asking yourself what is really being said about God? If it excludes, restricts, endangers, polarizes, or threatens; if it is life-taking not life-giving, it is not a "grown-up" version of God. However, if it includes, widens, and envelopes, it is worth a second look. In our reading of the Isaiah text, God's universal presence along with God's request for help become the central point. Our "grown-up" God asks whom shall I send to expand human understandings of the Divine, not because Christianity will die if we don't, but because of its proven capacity to kill? Whom shall I send, God asks, to help my people, which are all people, grasp the truth of a grander, more inclusive God? May we say with grace, here we are, send us!