

What's your perception of God?

A superior being, undoubtedly. But what is God like? Picky? Stern? Harsh? Warm? Demanding? Loving?

Our scripture lessons today suggest something about God's nature. And they suggest something about the kind of relationship we're called to have with God.

I usually don't deal with all 3 of our main lessons in one sermon. And I've preached before on all of these lessons individually. But today I want to consider them together. Because in these 3 lessons we see an interesting set of encounters with God through 3 of the most highly regarded men in the Bible: Isaiah, and Peter, and Paul. And after these encounters, each one of them moves to a deeper and truer place in their relationship with God. And so, I want to look at Isaiah, then Peter, then Paul.

Let's turn first to our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah ch6. Isaiah 6 tells of Isaiah's glorious vision of God during a time of great political uncertainty. In the year of King Uzziah's death, Isaiah sees a vision of God. God's throne is high and lofty—very majestic. And the hem of his robe alone is enough to fill the whole temple. There are seraphim in attendance. They use their wings to veil themselves from God's overwhelming presence. They sing that God is Holy, holy, holy, the most superlative thing said in scripture about God's nature. There were earthquakes and the whole place was filled with smoke.

Which brings us to Isaiah's reaction. Isaiah sees God in all of his glory and says, "Woe is me! I am lost."

Notice, he is not saying, "Woe is me, I'm worthless." This is not low self-esteem on Isaiah's part. But in the presence of God, Isaiah is acutely aware of how far he falls short of God's glory and majesty.

"Woe is me!" Isaiah says. "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Unclean lips. We have an expression that the eye is the window of the soul. Isaiah's culture would have said something similar. For them, the lips were connected to the heart. The things you said indicated who you were at heart. "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." Isaiah is saying that at heart, both he and his people fall far short of God. He is crying out in despair at how far he is from ever measuring up to the beauty and the wholeness and holiness of God.

And this is actually a very healthy place to be spiritually. Not low self-esteem: "I'm worthless." But a healthy realization that I fall far short of what God intends.

It's a corrective to narcissism and pride. We might be saying, "Hey, I'm really cool. Hey, I've really got my act together. Don't you wish you could be like me?" When you think that way, God has a hard time working in your life.

That's the point Isaiah comes to in ch6. Ch6 means that he's been a prophet for 5 chapters already. He's really been laying it on the people. Maybe he was beginning to think that he was really hot stuff. 'Hey, I've got the inside track with God.'

But ch6 he realizes, "Woe is me." 'Compared to who God really is, I fall far short.'
This marvelous vision shows Isaiah in an extremely powerful way who God really is, and who he is in relationship to God.

But once Isaiah is in this position, God can take care of it. We're told that God sends an angel to pick up a hot coal from the fire with a pair of tongs. The angel touches the coal to Isaiah's mouth and brings cleansing, saying, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

Then God says "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah is able to say, "Here am I; send me!" After God brings grace and power and cleansing, then Isaiah is really ready to fully enter his prophetic ministry.

In Isaiah 6 God is not some hyper-picky God who demands perfection. Instead, God is a magnificent God who calls Isaiah into a deeper relationship. And it is God who equips Isaiah to enter into that deeper relationship and to carry out his ministry.

Briefly, I want to look at how this same thing plays out with Peter and Paul in our other 2 lessons. Let's fast forward about 650 years from Isaiah to Luke. Our Gospel lesson is from Luke, ch5. We're early in Jesus' ministry. And at this point, Jesus is trying to preach by the lakeshore, but the crowd is pressing in on him. Jesus sees a couple of boats. He climbs into one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, who will later get the nickname Peter. In the boat, Jesus begins to teach.

When the sermon is done, Jesus tells Simon Peter to row back out into deep water to let down his nets. Simon tells him that they'd been fishing all night long without catching anything, but he says he'll do it.

When he does do it, they catch so many fish that the nets begin to break, and they have to call for reinforcements from the other boat.

Which brings us to Simon Peter's reaction. In the face of this incredible catch, Simon Peter changes his tune. At the beginning of their encounter, Peter calls Jesus "Master/Teacher/Rabbi." But after the catch, Peter changes the title. He calls Jesus, "Lord." He falls down at Jesus' knees and says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Like Isaiah in the face of God's presence, Simon Peter is confronted by his own unworthiness and brokenness in the presence of Jesus.

But just as in Isaiah, it is at this moment, when Peter bottoms out, that God can begin to really work with him. "Don't be afraid," Jesus tells him, "from now on you're going to be fishing for people." Jesus calls Peter. And God begins to equip Peter for ministry.

Let's fast forward another 25 years or so to 1 Corinthians ch15 In the early 50's Paul is writing to the church in Corinth. And he concludes his letter with a reminder of the most important part of the Good News, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In ch15 Paul lists all the people the Resurrected Jesus appeared to. Jesus appeared to Cephas, another word for Peter, and the 12 apostles. Jesus also appeared to 500 other disciples, most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote the letter. Then he appeared to James and the other apostles.

Finally, Paul says, "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

Last week, we heard in Acts about how Jesus had appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. And Jesus had called Paul to a special ministry, taking the good news from Jewish territory out into the larger Mediterranean world.

But Paul here describes that appearance from Jesus with these words: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

Jesus appeared to all the other apostles. Last of all, Paul says, he appeared to me, even though I was "untimely born."

Untimely born is a term for a miscarriage or an abortion. Paul is saying, in essence, I'm not like an immature apostle. I'm not even like a baby apostle. I'm more like a miscarriage.

In his words, "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

Paul is saying, because of my actions, because of my sinfulness, because of the mistakes I made in the past, Paul is saying, I don't deserve what God has done for me.

But then, we hear the wonderful line. Paul says, "But by the grace of God I am what I am."

In the old cartoons, Popeye would say, "I yam what I yam." When Popeye said it, he meant "That's the way it is, and I can't change it."

But Paul is saying, by God's grace I am what I am. It's not because of how wonderful I am. It's because of how wonderful God is. It's about what God has done for me. God in his grace has called me to be an apostle, though I certainly didn't deserve it.

Isaiah said, "Woe is me, I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips."

Peter said, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Paul said, "I'm a miscarriage, I don't even deserve to be called an apostle."

This is not low self-esteem. But this is a realization for each of them of how imperfect they were in the face of God.

But after God's intervention in each of their lives, Isaiah could say, "Here I am, send me."

Peter could follow Jesus and fish for people.

Paul could say, "By his grace I am what I am."

How about you?

What's it like between you and God?

Do you come swaggering into God's presence? Are you cocky? Do you think, 'I'm pretty hot stuff?'

Then maybe you need a dose of reality, the reality experienced by Isaiah, Peter, and Paul. Maybe you need to consider who God is, and who you are in the scheme of things.

Or and like Isaiah, Peter and Paul early on, are you stuck in the "Woe is me" mode? Are you paralyzed by a sense of your own sinfulness? Are you carrying the guilt of past burdens and past mistakes? Then, like Isaiah, and Peter, and Paul, open yourself to God's cleansing, God's forgiveness, God's grace.

God has a plan and a purpose for each of you. Don't be so sure of yourself that you ignore his voice.

But just as importantly, don't be so immobilized that can't respond to his voice.

God has work for each of you to do. And God promises you sufficient grace and power to do what he calls you to do.

As the saying goes, "God doesn't call those who are already equipped. God equips those whom he calls."

May you listen for God's call. May you open yourself to God's powerful, equipping grace. And may you be able to respond like Isaiah, "Here I am. Send me."