

**“Uncomfortable Calling”**  
**Isaiah 6:1-8**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**Trinity Sunday**  
**May 27, 2018**

“Worship is the main act of the Christian community of faith,” it says on our website. “Every Sunday *we* gather to encounter God. *We bring our* voices, *our* music, *the preacher’s interpretive reflection* on a Bible passage, *our* prayers of thanksgiving, *our* prayers of request, *our* hopes, *our* dreams, *our* pain and sometimes even *our* protest. But *we* always join together with the expectation that God will meet *us* in worship. This kind of encounter with the Holy is transformative.”

After reading Isaiah, I think that description is way out of whack and I’m pretty sure I’m the person who wrote it. Isaiah would put it like this, “Worship is the place where *God* turns our world upside down. *God* terrifies us with otherworldly displays of petrifying power, giving us no choice but to submit to God’s assignment. In worship, *God’s voice* speaks through *God’s music* and *God’s story* to demand allegiance to the *God* with specific, political and personal assignments for those whom *God* calls. Worship is *God’s domain* and no one escapes unscathed.”

I expect a lot of you to take issue with the word “terrifies” since we spend a lot of time deprogramming people who have been trained to be afraid of God. Honestly, it’s not the word I would choose, either. I prefer to offset our fear of God with those Old Testament texts where God is described as a nursing mother, or God professes God’s love for Israel, or where Leviticus calls on us all to love our neighbor as ourselves long before Jesus spoke these words. I was all prepared on this Trinity Sunday to preach a sermon about the relational nature of God: God’s intrapersonal nature which carries over into our interpersonal living. “Terrifying” is not my preferred descriptor for God.

But terrifying is the only word that comes to mind after studying this passage. Isaiah has a vision of God in the temple with seraphs in attendance. I’d always thought of seraphs as your typical Baroque-style angel – attractive looking, physically fit young adult, basically like a shirtless Chadwick Boseman with wings until scholar Rolf Jacobson pointed out that seraph in every other place in the Old Testament is a fiery serpent including two other places in the book of Isaiah.<sup>1</sup> Our Bibles leave the word untranslated which is cheating since those scholars surely know that most of us are going to be thinking Chadwick Boseman with wings, not flying, flaming serpents.

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<sup>1</sup> *Brainwave*, a podcast of Workingpreacher.org, SB606, Holy Trinity Sunday, May 19, 2018. Jacobson argues that the flaming serpent is more in keeping with the vision since many Israelites in this period had come to worship the “snake on a pole” relic that had been brought into the Temple. The flaming serpent translation occurs in Isaiah 14:29 and 30:6. The two other occurrences of “seraphim” in the Old Testament are also translated serpents: Numbers 21:6–8 and Deuteronomy 8:15. (The authors opt for “poisonous” instead of “fiery.”)

One of those fiery, winged serpents brings a live coal and touches Isaiah's trembling lips. Now I don't know about you, but if a winged, fiery serpent brought a hot coal close to my lips while God sat watching from a throne in a temple, I'm done. Terrifying is an understatement. Truthfully, I feel a bit whiplashed, even tricked by the lectionary – that prescribed list of readings that we've been following over the last several months. All through Easter we got all these texts about God's love for us and just when we start thinking about this comforting God who's always there for us, the Spirit descends with a rushing wind and flaming tongues on Pentecost, knocking us off our balance. Then this week flaming, winged serpents teach us what real, terrifying worship looks like.

But maybe we need this kind of tilt-a-whirl text to correct, not only our preferred definitions of seraphs, but also our preferred definitions of what calls from God looks like. Too many of us have been shaped by the idea that a call from God generates a feeling roughly equivalent to winning the lottery or relaxing on the beach or feeling at-one-with nature in the woods. I'm sure some calls do come with that feeling, but Isaiah offers a different model. Isaiah's call comes with fear.

As I see it, there are at least two kinds of fear in this text: fear of God and fear of the assignment. I'm not sure which kind is worse. Isaiah is called to go tell the people that hard times are ahead. This was not a popular announcement in the year King Uzziah died since Uzziah and his son helped Judah avoid an all out conflict with the superpower to the north, Assyria. Right about the time that Isaiah was receiving his call, Judah was feeling like it was in the clear. Judah had been forced into a choice between an alliance with its cousin to the Israel and another small nation of Syria, or an alliance with Assyria. Uzziah had deftly avoided choosing either. Peace had been at hand for 50 years.<sup>2</sup>

But Uzziah had wrongly assumed that his military might could compensate for his lack of faithfulness to God. Enter Isaiah, whose mission is to go tell the people that the worst is yet to come. That the people have so departed from God's ways that things have to get worse before they get better. Things have to be dismantled before they can be rebuilt. Not exactly a warm and fuzzy assignment.

Maybe God's call is like that. Bryan Stevenson said as much at the Johns Hopkins University commencement this past Wednesday. He told the graduating class that they should see their degrees as a kind of authorization to change the world. Of the four things he told them they must do if they wanted to change the world, two of the four things weren't going to bring warm feelings. You have to get proximate to pain he told the graduates. And you have to do things that are

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<sup>2</sup> Remember that by this time Israel had split into two kingdoms – the northern kingdom of “Israel” and the southern kingdom of “Judah.” Uzziah (aka Azariah) manages to avoid a choice between an alliance with the smaller northern kingdoms of Israel and Syria or an alliance with Assyria leading to a relatively long reign (52 years) and extended peace. Shortly after his death (740 BCE), one of his successors, “Ahaz,” allies himself with Assyria. This alliance looks to be a correct move as Assyria soon invades Syria and Israel, eliminating Judah's threats to the north. But the alliance leads to the invasion of Judah, first by the Assyrians and later by the sudden rise of Judah's new enemy, Babylon, which will eventually sack Jerusalem and destroy the temple in 687 BCE.

inconvenient and uncomfortable. Neither of these things make life easier, but both of these things are necessary to change the world.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, Stevenson's words only make sense to people who want to change the world. David Brooks wrote recently that such people are that way because someone planted an ideal in them early in their lives. Summarizing the book *Some Do Care*, Brooks wrote, "They are not tempted by worldly success because they are not interested in worldly success. . . They don't talk much about personal happiness, because they're not particularly interested in themselves, period. . . Their identity is not based on being a lawyer or a pianist. Their identity is defined by a certain moral action. They feel at home in the world when they are performing that moral action and feel out of sorts when they are not."<sup>4</sup> Maybe that's a call.

Because while I don't know anyone who's ever seen flaming serpents with wings, I've encountered many who are listening for God's leading in their own lives. Calling them not to run from pain. Calling them to do things inconvenient and uncomfortable.

Maybe that's call: knowing that your roots lie in soil deeper than what passes for power in our transitory world. Trusting that the choices that tug on your heart come from a place so far beyond you and your control that it can be frightening. It's like of the two fears present in Isaiah – the fear of the assignment and the fear of God, the fear of the assignment isn't even considered. And maybe terrifying isn't the right word for this passage. Maybe it's more like awe – awe at a deeper power that comes from the Lord.

Bryan Stevenson closed his remarks on Wednesday with a story about a man he met on one of his many speaking engagements. The older, Black man, Stevenson said, had a stern, angry look all through Stevenson's presentation at the church where he was speaking somewhere in the south. After everyone else had greeted him and left, this older Black man, seated in a wheelchair wheeled himself to the front of the church and got up in front of him and asked, "Do you know what you're doing?" And Stevenson just stood there. So he asked him again, "Do you know what you're doing? He asked him a 3<sup>rd</sup> time, "Do you know what you're doing?" And this older man looked at him and said, "I'm gonna tell you what you're doing." "You're beating the drum for justice. You keep beating the drum for justice." And then this man grabbed him by his jacket and pulled him into his wheelchair and said, "come here I'm going to show you something." He said, "you see this scar I have behind my right ear. I got that scar in Green County, Alabama in 1963 trying to register people to vote." He turned his head and he said, "you see this cut down here at the bottom of my neck. I got that cut in Philadelphia, Mississippi in 1964 try to register people to vote." He turned his head again and said, "you see this dark spot. That's my

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<sup>3</sup> The other two included "challenge and change existing narratives" and "stay hopeful." <https://hub.jhu.edu/2018/05/24/commencement-2018-stevenson/>

<sup>4</sup> David Brooks, "What Moral Heroes are Made Of," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2018. Brooks' column is largely shaped by the book *Some Do Care* by Anne Colby and William Damon -

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/21/opinion/moral-heroes-improve-society.html>

bruise. I got my bruise in Birmingham, AL in 1965 trying to register people to vote.” He looked at Bryan Stevenson and said, “I’m going to tell you something young man. People look at me and they think I’m some old man sitting in a wheelchair covered with cuts and bruises and scars.” But he said, “I’m going to tell you something. These are not my cuts. These are not my bruises. These are not my scars. These are my medals of honor.”<sup>5</sup>

Sounds to me like a person called by God. Sounds to me like a person so in awe of God’s power that there is no room for fear of any assignment. Sounds to me a person who, though she may fear many things, fears mostly not listening to that voice tugging her to get proximate to people’s pain, compelling her to do what’s inconvenient and uncomfortable, defining her identity not by worldly success, not by being a lawyer or a pianist, but by doing God’s will in the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Notes from Bryan Stevenson’s commencement address on May 24, 2018, <https://hub.jhu.edu/2018/05/24/commencement-2018-stevenson/>.