



Growth Questions

“What image(s) of God has been consistently reinforced in your own life? How have they impacted your understanding of him? Your pursuit of him?”

“How has your tranquil existence been interrupted recently? What was it that you were depending on for peace that is no longer available? What now?”

“When did God become a reality to you? Has the holiness of God ever disturbed you or interrupted you? Has your experience of God ever re-arranged you?”

Teaching Notes

Without an accurate image of God, we will never offer him our devotion and, in the absence of a God worthy of our devotion, we will be forced to look elsewhere for something to which we might attach our hearts and attempt to satisfy our deep hunger and thirst.

God has always intended that exposure to and experience of his goodness would get our attention, incite our imaginations, capture our hearts and re-order our lives [Jeremiah 32:38-41]. Imagine that: God trying to inspire us?

If you are like me, your posture toward God will, at times, vacillate between “cozy companionship” and “unnerving acquaintance”.

I think, in one sense, we have diluted the notion of holiness in order to make God more user-friendly; more palatable. I think the process has emasculated God. While he is kindly and benevolent, he loses his ability to inspire “fear” [he no longer carries any ‘weight’]. So, we offer him the occasional gesture (‘wink/nod’), but assume that he is content to remain aloof and mostly occupied with who wins the Super Bowl or pulls in a “Grammy”.

In another sense, when we emphasize God as ‘out there somewhere’ [Bette Middler theology] he is thought to be not only indifferent, but a bit agitated. He is inspecting us, watching us, “from a distance”, like an annoying accountability partner. It would be in our best interest to find out what he wants and give it to him and we’ll all be happy.

“Fear of the Lord...” (Proverbs 9:10): The stock-biblical-phrase for a way of life that pays attention to God and lives responsively.

Fear of the Lord speaks to the right posture toward him which is not simply a reaction, but a right relationship to be developed (Proverbs 1:7).

“In the year that King Uzziah (ooz-zee-yaw) died...”

Uzziah’s story is recounted in 2 Chronicles 26. He was (16) years old when he assumed the throne from his father. I don’t know about you, but at (16), I was consumed with the early signs of newly-sprouting facial hair and the embarrassment over taking my driver’s test in a car that was larger than many sea vessels. Uzziah is taking the reins of a nation in turmoil.

He had a solid run of (52) years but, as so many with such early success and prominence, he became presumptuous (he “forgot”: Deuteronomy 4:23; 6:12; Psalm 103:2) and the effects of his fall resonated throughout the entire Kingdom. **What now?**

Uzziah died and, with him, died the security, the comfort, the peace to which they had long been accustomed. It is in this year that Isaiah goes to the Temple. He is seeking answers. He is seeking solace. He wants some strategy which might help address the turmoil, but what he experiences is a dramatic encounter of God.

To encounter God who is *‘lofty and enthroned’* is to discover the reason for everything (not the “reasonableness” of everything, but the larger reality); to recognize the disparity between who God is (and what he desires) and our own version of reality. To acknowledge how ‘out-of-control’ our lives really are.

The Bible distills all of God’s attributes and character qualities into one robust, yet misunderstood word: “holy”.

To describe God as holy is to recognize his ‘Godness’ (lit. ‘set apart’); everything about God that distinguishes him and makes him worthy the title. Holiness instantly confronts you with your **mediocrity** (e.g. like the reality that hits you when you discover that, perhaps, you are not the best piano player in the world, as your mother suggested).

Holy suggests that...

... God doesn't need us in order to be who he is. While we find humanity to be celebrated and dignified in the Story, we're not necessary.

Ecc. 5:2 "God is in heaven and you are on earth..."

Acts 17:25 "... he has no needs as if he can be served by human hands..."

"God is utterly happy in himself and stands, therefore, in no need of creation". [First Vatican Council]

If we had something that God needed, we could leverage such a relationship to our advantage. But, because he has no needs, we are called to assume our rightful place as the created; as dependent; as the cared for ones.

... God is not to be 'imaged'. Whatever ideas we craft of God, apart from his own revelation, will be distorted by our own attempts to shape him in our image.

... God always engages his creation solely of his own volition. All of his movements toward us are unprovoked. Gracious.

Our greatest need is for a vision of God which simultaneously ruins us and restores us.

It's not until we get our first real glimpse of God that we get our first authentic glance into ourselves.

You'll notice that when people authentically encounter God--- when the interaction moves from conceptual to relational--- people begin to re-evaluate themselves.

It is the inevitable human response [e.g. Job 42:5 *"I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. I take back everything I said."* Peter: *"Go away from me, Lord. I am a sinful man..."* Luke 5:8]

Isaiah already believes in God. His encounter is not "indisputable evidence that there is a God", but a dramatic realization of the inadequacy of his belief.

Belief in God, as a concept, never really confronts you; never really challenges you. never really alters or re-arranges you. "Believing in God" allows you to fit him neatly into your personal creed. "Seeing God" alters you; it is your "undoing", but not for the purpose of leaving you "in a pile", but restoring your confidence in God.

It's not until we observe the movements of God toward us (grace) that we are made aware of the gravity of our situation apart from him, and the lengths to which he will go in order to demonstrate his love and win back our trust.

Holiness allows us to come to terms with both our finiteness (limitations) and our incredible worth. It prevents us from both over-estimating ourselves and under-estimating ourselves.

The initial encounter with holiness and the corresponding discomfort it creates is the initiation of the process, but it is not the objective. What usually begins with self-loathing is meant to result in glory: a re-evaluation of our own worth and identity in the vision of God which is not meant to simply **diminish** us, but to **establish** us.

Notice that as soon as Isaiah identifies and confesses his sin (vs.5), he finds not the impetus to now move toward God, but the reality of God's aggressive grace moving toward him.

He finds this **grace to be the modality of transformation**. When he sees the "fire" coming at him, instead of consuming him, it actually radically alters his vision of God, his vision of himself and his place in God's world.

In one, grace-filled episode, Isaiah moves from self-loathing and despair to courageous self-identification. He went from an approach to life based on his own efforts and self-evaluation to an identity firmly established in God's restorative love.

"**Here I am**" is the response that signals our willingness to live into such a reality; to cooperate with all that God is doing around, in and through us. It is a prayer of engagement. It is a prayer of surrender. It is a prayer of trust.

Closing Thoughts

Maybe we've missed the whole point of holiness (at least I'm sure I have!)

Maybe it's his holiness that actually compels him to move toward us, and not away from us?

Maybe it's his holiness that makes him the most qualified to be 'with us'?! To demonstrate to us what it was like to be fully human- in vital relationship with God and each other?

Maybe it's holiness that makes him approachable; that makes him so secure (complete) in himself that it would allow him to enter the mess of our lives without fear of being tarnished himself?