

Struggling with the Holiness of God

Isaiah 6:1-13

There are certain impressions that have remained with me since childhood. One of them from the summer of 1967 is of a family visit to St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal—a towering Roman Catholic basilica on Mt. Royal and where, specifically, the memorable image is of an older woman I observed on the lengthy stairway up the hill. I still recall her face and especially her knees.

The woman's face was worn and somber with tear-filled eyes, drops cascading down her cheeks in a stream of apparent anguish. Her knees, though, caught my attention, as they were swollen and discolored—bruised, I imagine, by her ascent up the 99 steps leading to the great doors of the basilica; a climb she had taken one step at a time in a kneeling position—an act of devotion where she recited the rosary (I assume) on each granite tread, apparently seeking God's mercy before she would finally enter the church's sanctuary. She was not alone. There were many others approaching this sanctuary (which in its early history was credited with miracles of healing); so up the pilgrim's staircase they ascended in similar fashion that day—a sight I could not quite wrap my mind around as an eleven-year-old.

I recall at the time asking my father why she and the others were doing this. Why can't she walk up the stairs like us? My father's reply went something like this: "Because she must love God so much that she couldn't come into this holy place except on her knees."

His answer didn't help me in the moment, as everyone else was walking—at most, only huffing and puffing from the 800-foot climb

in mid-summer. How is it she was showing love by harming herself? I was curious as I watched the woman pause at each step for a minute or two before proceeding onto the next, wiping the imprint of blood—her own blood—off the previous step before she ascended to the next. I thought to myself, why would God make her do this and not me? Did I not love God? There was nothing in my childhood church life that made her behavior comprehensible. So it remained a mystery in a young boy's mind.

Over the years I'm not sure I've solved the mystery; nor have I let go of that haunting impression, even in recent years when Wendy and I went to Mt. Royal and I encountered once again the pilgrims' steps. Over the years, I've been to many churches and religious sites around the world considered holy by the pious and needy. Occasionally, I'll see similar acts of reverent devotion, but rarely outside of Catholicism. I assume it was intentionally left out of the Reformation.

I wonder, why? Is it how we Protestants prefer to frame our theology around penitence or is it merely the way sanctuaries impact us? For instance, when the ceiling in a house of worship is high and filled with grandeur, it's more likely to inspire awe and humility, implying it's a place depicting divine transcendency over humanity. People are made to feel small in large spaces and insignificant in overwhelming sanctuaries. Whereas, a worship setting like ours with a relatively low ceiling and transparent windows conveys a different sense—one of a home—a spiritual home, both inviting and affirming of people. Divine immanence is conveyed here; we feel God is among us, not apart from us.

So, is it architecture that compels such a reverent response or is it one's theology that leads some to fall on their knees, while others just stroll right in? Theologically, one could argue, people normally don't struggle with coming before a holy God because the larger-than-life transcendence of the Almighty has been replaced with a much more immanent, approachable, and embracing friend we have in Jesus (*What a friend we have in Jesus...*). We have pulled back the "curtain" (like the scene in *The Wizard of Oz*) and found the human face of God in Jesus to the point we bypass the strange holy otherness of the Almighty for a faith far more personal, palpable, and pleasing. Hence, to imitate this woman doesn't calculate or make sense; it never even enters our minds when we arrive at church. It would turn into a spectacle crawling into this sanctuary on our knees—to pray each step of the way into church! We come to be healed from the wounds in our lives, not to inflict more upon us. Why magnify the pain with tormenting piety? It makes no sense.

Still, there's something about this woman that haunts me to this day because I've never shaken the initial impression of something I have never imitated. What prevents me from scaling the steps on my knees, literally or figuratively? Why do most of us enter a sanctuary as if it were little more than a fellowship hall? What are we missing in seeking a sacred place for worship of our holy God? What keeps us from agonizing in silence before God like this old, anguished soul? To put it more plainly, why are my knees made sore and bruised from looking for junk stuffed under my bed, rather than from kneeling down in prayer beside it?

Good questions. When you think about them, they become haunting questions. And as you explore them even more, they turn into perplexing questions.

I'm not suggesting that we must imitate this poor, old woman on the stairway for hope and healing. But one thing is possible: when Christians indulge so freely and fully in the friendly, undemanding embrace of the human face of God in Jesus, we may be overlooking or underplaying an important aspect of theology we haven't yet grasped, i.e., the inherent emotional and existential distance we mortals have from the almighty power and presence of God. God is not like us. No mortal being is transcendent and holy as is God—"Wholly Other," to employ the famous term coined by the German theologian, Rudolf Otto.

A transcendent and holy God is outside of our normal human reference points. It's even more challenging today to conceive of a divine Presence than in the ancient past, since the worldviews are vastly different. When we conceive of the "place" of God, it's not just beyond the clouds, as it was in the minds of antiquity. Now we must reconcile our belief with the incalculable distances and reality of the cosmos. How audacious can we be to claim there is somehow an ultimate Being behind all that exists, even while cosmologists are exploring what reality is *billions of light-years* away in the universe? If God is out there somewhere, then what sort of divine Presence are we worshipping? How can a Being beyond and before the Big Bang even be conceptually real to us? What are we humans, who are literally nothing against the vast expanses of the cosmos?

If we are worshipping the One who created all that is known and what is still unknown, what are we doing—who or what are we addressing? How can we even conceive of the person of God, let alone know what to say to such a cosmic force beyond nature? Does any human idea, theological term, or descriptive prose begin to adequately convey what is being referenced when we pray?

Who is God Almighty? What is God Almighty? Is there some meaningful substance to this One who is beyond human knowledge and description? What does God consist of? Energy? Mass? Or something altogether different and beyond us? The holy, unhuman-like nature of God is something we should at least ponder. Pondering this in itself is enough to drop us to our knees.

I suppose, this is why we are drawn to the idea of the *love* of God, rather than the holiness of God. Love is at least something we can grasp and identify with. Besides, most people do need comfort, not condemnation—relief, not reckoning. They are drawn to God’s forgiveness, because too often those around do not offer it. They look for affirmation and encouragement, mainly due to a lack of it in their daily lives. Many of us seek a God who supports us when we are weak, who picks us up when we are down, who is always there waiting in the wings of our life because we feel ripped apart by critical family members, jealous friends, irritable neighbors, stressful finances, and demanding jobs. That’s the appeal of religion and of a trusting faith, isn’t it? We seek God’s loving embrace for what we are or based on what we need and desire in life. Our customary impression of God is shaped by what appeals to us most. We seek a God who unconditionally loves us so we can live our lives more beneficially.

Though none of this creates a false understanding of God, in all honesty it can be subject to manipulation, or merely be a projection of ourselves, at least until we deal with the holy otherness of God. The grace and love of God are too easily made into something humans control if we have no appreciation for who God truly is. By not struggling with who God is—especially with the holiness of God—the wholly otherness of God—we may not appreciate everything we should about God.

Isaiah offers us a glimpse into this un-nameable, remarkable reality. No one really knows if Isaiah had a literal vision akin to what's described in today's text or if it was merely an allegory for what human beings experience emotionally when pondering God's greatness and holiness.

The basic storyline is of the prophet being commissioned to be the voice of God before Judah shortly before the collapse of the northern kingdom, Israel, when Isaiah was being instructed to go to King Ahaz of Judah to not fear his immediate enemies to the north in Israel and Syria (it would take a Bible study to fully explain this). In any case, our attention is on his spiritual experience—his encounter with the Holy One known as YHWH. Here we have the impression that it was not only awe-inspiring, but viscerally unnerving, enough for Isaiah (the one who supposed to be divinely favored) to cry out: “Oh, woe is me! I am doomed because every word that passes my lips is sinful, and I live among a people whose every word is sinful!”

We might try to imagine the emotions behind this vision—a vision that shook Isaiah to the core, dropping him to his knees. Perhaps, we can imagine it as a brilliant spotlight, where God's

holiness shone light upon those darkest and most shameful areas—a brilliance that even if it shines upon our best qualities and character, would still cause us to cower in comparison with God’s perfection and holiness. Or maybe it was the overpowering sense of redemptive love, enough to drop him to his knees, feeling utterly undeserving of it. We don’t know, so all you can do is place yourself against the magnitude of the greatest reality imaginable, where there is no place for you to stand! You are utterly overwhelmed—nakedly small and crudely insignificant before greatness where, most of all, you realize you are merely human. There is no place to hide, let alone anywhere to be on equal footing with this most Holy One. Unlike Jesus, God’s presence throws you to your knees, where you gasp for mercy because of whose Presence you are in.

As much as we might prefer to avoid this spiritual sensation, the mysterious holiness of God is the only context out of which God’s love comes to us. Divine love is just as impossible for us to fully know and comprehend, as is divine holiness. Divine love is not just a more perfected form of human love; it is not ordinary, conditional, and empathetically limited, as is ours—it is unique, distinct, unexpected, undeserved, beyond all measure, all-encompassing and morally redemptive as saving grace. As we experience it, God’s unfathomable love can be as difficult to grasp as is the mysterious nature of God.

That said, such wondrous love is held in tension with the characteristics of the Holy One that are terrifying, awe-inspiring, and overwhelming, and quite often demanding of us. This is evident in everything we do and encounter in life. Divine mercy and love are held in tension with divine accountability and justice. By holding

these truths (divine love and divine justice) side-by-side, we understand that God's love is never owed to us, rather it is offered to us from a state of holiness as a marvelous gift of grace—heroic, unilateral, and life-changing. It is a holy love that should never be taken lightly or for granted, even though we can be certain, such love will never let us go.

Friends, at times I've wondered if the underlying reason I couldn't let go of this haunting memory of a sorrowing woman on the basilica steps is because she represents my personal reluctance, if not resistance, to being humbled before God. There may be something in all of us that prefers God to be the same size as us, or at least to possess a human face. I admit, I'm very much drawn to the nature of Jesus much more than to the nature of God. Maybe that's because I'm afraid of what I cannot know about God—or at least of what divine holiness will demand of me. Yet, if the holiness of God creates a genuine struggle within my soul, my correct response should be to let it inspire me to be better than I am.

If so, it's likely a recognition of God's holiness that inspires piety in people and makes pilgrims ascend a demanding incline to a sanctuary, even with a worn and tear-filled face and swollen and bloodied knees. Pilgrims, like this old woman fifty years ago, are compelled by both the humbling nature of God's holiness and mercy.

I probably will never punish myself in like manner, but I hope and pray that I might have similar faith and a deeper appreciation for the One to whom I pray. I hope to take more seriously the divine command to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with my God. If it takes the nagging memory of a lowly woman on her knees

to remind me of the holiness of God, then it's a sign of grace that the Merciful and Mighty One continually compels me to never let her go.

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10 February 2019