

“The Renewing Power of God”

The Reverend Peter Cook
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First Congregational Church of Burlington

Isaiah 6:1 to 8; 43:18 to 19

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.’*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: ‘Woe is me! 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!’ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’

*Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.*

As we talk about Isaiah’s call to ministry, I wanted to reflect with you on two calls.

Two phone calls that is.

The first phone call came from the chair of the search committee, Mary Ellen Spencer. As I watched a couple of bright red cardinals dancing in the bushes outside my window, I can remember sitting at my kitchen table talking with Mary Ellen about First Church. I had looked at the profile and was very excited about what I read. Here was a congregation which so obviously had a long standing commitment to justice in the community and world and, at the same time, was very eager to extend a very warm and extravagant welcome to all people. But Mary Ellen made those words jump off the page as she conveyed her enthusiasm and love for this congregation. We talked for a good long while and, when I put down the phone, I said to Martha: “I think this just may be it!” Thanks Mary Ellen for that call and your kindness and graciousness.

Then there was a phone interview. We talked together about so many things. I confess I don’t remember all that was asked and said in that interview but here is what I do remember. I remember that there was a lot of laughing. It made me feel we had a shared understanding of ministry which made it easier for us not

to take ourselves too seriously and to comfortably poke fun at ourselves. I believe God was laughing along at that moment.

It was so great to finally meet the search committee in person. It was a wonderful weekend. We did some dreaming together. We dreamed of how talented staff and laity could work together in a sacred covenant to help First Church worship the living God in fresh ways.

Coming off of your extraordinary vote to become an Open and Affirming Congregation, we pondered how we could extend an extravagant welcome to others. We thought about how people of all ages could learn together while sharing in a playful fellowship. And we talked about how we could build on your amazing legacy to do justice in the community and the world.

All of these experiences and the incredibly gracious hospitality you have extended to Martha, Alex, Madeline and me these past couple of days, remind me of what Forrest Gump said to his girlfriend Jenny “I am not a very smart man but I know what love is”. Put another way, I don’t always get it but I am a pretty intuitive person and I know when something feels right. And this feels right. When I think about serving First Church, the words of Frederick Buechner ring true: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”ⁱ

You should know, however, that I am not a romantic but a realist. I know that churches are pretty scrappy places. Any healthy church worth its salt must work every day to rid itself of pretense and have the courage to humbly admit they don’t have it all together. Church’s, you know, have issues. So amidst the enthusiasm, I duly noted a familiar story line which pastors and laity tell each other these days about the struggles of the mainline church. For instance, in Vermont, there has been a 38% in church going Protestants.ⁱⁱ The numbers tell the story that people these days are more spiritual than religious which conveys their skepticism of organized religion. Others might say that young people are less interested in the church as we slash budgets for youth ministry. We are told that we live in a culture that is religiously illiterate. Given a choice, the story goes, people are more inclined to stay away from the institutional church and commune with God on a boat in Lake Champlain (provided, of course, that Champ the sea monster doesn’t eat your boat) or read the Sunday New York Times over coffee. Given the decline of interest in the church we can sound a little bit like the prophet Isaiah, who declared “woe is me! I am lost.”

I am not unsympathetic to the familiar story lines about church struggles because there is truth in them, but as someone who loves history, I have a certain reverence for the great struggles and triumphs of religious communities which put the “aint it awful” stories in a little perspective and reminds me what Mark Twain once said that “the reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.”ⁱⁱⁱ Or as Isaiah said out of the ashes of the Babylonian exile, “behold God is about to do new thing.”

What are the stories of struggle and rebirth from which we can draw strength and a sense of hope and renewal? Going back to an earlier time in Isaiah’s prophetic ministry when King Uzziah died, the land was filled with great nervousness. That is because Israel was weakened by the constant threat of domination and destruction from the Assyrians who lived on their borders. There were also political struggles and various forms of corruption weakening the fabric of the society.

And yet during this time of uncertainty what emerged here was an image of a restoration and hope offered by a great and powerful Yahweh God who sat on a throne. The king was surrounded by giant winged seraphs who were constantly singing the praises of God, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts, Heaven and Earth are filled with your glory.”

Now I confess I grimace a bit when I think of God sitting on a throne as giant seraph monsters sing God’s praises. Such an image of a king can reinforce patriarchy and the oppression of women which is its own

story of struggle and injustice. But, in another way, I think there is something to be said for the majesty and the renewing power of a transcendent God. In our lives there is a place for a God which is so big, so awesome and so wonderful that we come to realize that we don't have to carry the burdens of life alone. That's really good news. Moreover, a transcendent God will not be co-opted by any government, worldly king or queen, president or despot, self-absorbed church growth strategy, or shallow religiosity which cuts us off from the power of God. God is God and a constricting political ideology is no replacement for good theology. When the world is crumbling around you, when stories of decline are being told, when your best laid plans for a just society are coming apart at the seams, we need a God in our lives who is not going to be sold a bill of goods by anyone. It was from this God that Isaiah drew great strength. We can draw great strength from this powerful and transcendent God as well.

As I think about what the renewing power of God has done and will do for First Church to help us serve this community and world, I wish to share with you this story of courage and renewal in the face of despair. In 2006, I was privileged to receive a sabbatical grant from the Lilly Endowment to spend many days with the congregation of St. Mark's Anglican Church in a place called District 6 in Cape Town, South Africa. I delivered a sermon in that congregation six years ago this Sunday. That congregation is located in the heart of a neighborhood which 40 years prior was teeming with people. District 6 was an inter-religious and interracial community where blacks, whites, coloreds (which in South Africa refers to people of mixed race) lived, worked and prayed together as Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The South African government hated this diverse community because it undermined a bankrupt theology that people of different races needed to be separate from one another.

So the South African government, under the auspices of the Group Areas Act, demolished the homes of 60,000 people with big bulldozers and then they sent moms and dads, grandmas and grandpas, and boys and girls into the surrounding townships where they were separated by race and class and had to live in bad housing. The South African government practiced a very twisted sort of theology where they were far from Isaiah's confession and thought they could play God.

After the government ripped up every street and took down every light post, only one structure remained. That structure was St. Mark's Anglican Church. The South African Government tried to buy out that church thinking that money would talk louder than God. So they offered two million Rand to ship the church out to a township. The congregation, however, said no to the money and the government. Instead that congregation mounted a public resistance campaign. By the power of a transforming and renewing God, all those people who had been deported to the townships found ways to get back to that church for Sunday worship and fellowship. They came back to St. Marks even though they had to abide by draconian pass laws which restricted their movement in the country while having no access to reliable public transportation. But the people of St. Marks were hungry for the power of God in their lives. They were hungry for community. They were hungry to create a ministry of justice and welcome while the South African Government kept their distance. Today St. Marks remains a remarkably vital and vibrant congregation because they have experienced the power of a transcendent God which brings a lot of joy to people and helps them be courageous.

Now you don't read much in the literature on church growth about the growth strategy you should employ when the houses which surround your church are all demolished and 60,000 actual or potential parishioners are shipped out of town into substandard housing. I mean really, what do you do, send out a brochure? But here is what I learned from the time I have spent in Tanzania and South Africa and in my better moments in parish ministry. When we worship the living and transcendent God as if something is at stake. When we enter into a joy filled fellowship which extends an extravagant hospitality to strangers and friends alike, when we do justice and when we learn, pray, and play together, the power of God can't but change lives, bridge differences and inspire community.

If, like Isaiah, when the winged seraphs come down from the throne and touch our lips with the coal of radical forgiveness, you just can't help but want to dock your boat for a little while or drive through a snowstorm in order to worship a God who loves us so much and teaches us to love others. The early Christian writer Tertullian quoted a pagan official who said about the Christians: "look at how much they love each other!"^{iv} When we struggle, we can also delight in this image of great vitality from the Book of Acts, where we read "awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." (Acts 2:43 to 47)

When we let ourselves be overwhelmed by the renewing love of a transcendent God and God's amazing grace, we cannot help but want to create vital, spirit filled communities of faith that welcome the stranger and do justice. When Isaiah heard the powerful and transforming voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" What did Isaiah say, "Here am I; send me!"

As we dwell together in the transforming power of God, we too might say, 'Here we are, send us. Sign us up!'. Might we paraphrase for our purposes what John F. Kennedy said many years ago: ask not what our church can do for us but what we can do for our church and the community and world in which this amazing congregation dwells.

Here we are God, send us. Send us now for behold God is doing a new thing to help this congregation listen to its call and be a renewing, healing and reconciling force in the world.

So if you feel the high school cafeteria politics are getting to be too much, how can we support each other, and find the moral courage to stand up to the cliques and discrimination and testify to God's overwhelming love and acceptance? Here we are God send us.

If you ever feel sad, or lonely, or stuck in your house because it's hard to get out because body does not work as well as it once did, or the snow is blowing too hard, how can we as a community listen and care for you but also challenge you to find a new calling to serve at this stage in your life? Here we are God send us.

If you think you are too young to do much, consider that even though you might be ten or twelve, you can share an uncommon love by feeding the hungry, being a good friend, or lifting up your voice for that which is right and true. Remember what Isaiah prophesied, "A little child shall lead us". (Isaiah 11:6) Here we are God send us.

If you believe that there are people in our community who are looking for some companionship, fellowship and joy in their lives, how can we work together to offer uncommonly generous opportunities to eat, laugh and pray together? Here we are God send us.

If you have a musical gift or you have a song in your heart which is waiting to be sung, how can we blend our gifts and receive the gifts of other to build community and do justice in the world? Here we are God send us.

I stand here today to say as clearly and strongly as I know how that I can feel the renewing power God in

my heart and in this wonderful congregation. I stand ready and eager to work with the great staff and laity in this church to listen to God's call.

May we blend our gifts together to offer an uncommon prayerful and spirit filled welcome to others in the name of the risen Christ and as we build on this congregation's very proud history to love well and do justice in this community and world.

Here we are, oh God, send us now, for together we can do a new thing.

ⁱ Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC by Frederick Buechner, Page 95.

ⁱⁱ According to a report prepared by the Reverend Robert Lee for First Church entitled: "Swimming Upstream, One Congregation's Story", the state of Vermont's Protestant faith communities declined by 38% while our membership (at First Congregational) fell by only 20%. Nationally our United Church of Christ lost 29% of its members from 1990 to 2008. In Vermont, the United Church of Christ lost 22% of its members in the same period.

ⁱⁱⁱ After his obituary was mistakenly published, Mark Twain sent a cable from London stating: "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." See [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What is the Mark Twain quote about his premature death#ixzz1x6ppQWWU](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_Mark_Twain_quote_about_his_premature_death#ixzz1x6ppQWWU).

^{iv} The quote comes from the Apology of Tertullian, 197 AD, chapter 37. In that chapter, he contrasted the love of Christian community with the selfishness of pagan society, Tertullian said "But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See, they say, how they love one another, for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred. See, they say about us, how they are ready even to die for one another, for they themselves would sooner kill." See <http://www.logoslibrary.org/tertullian/apology/39.html>