

“Goose Bumps”
Isaiah 6:1-13, Luke 5:1-11
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When is the last time you “fell on your knees?”

In this passage, **Simon Peter** falls down at Jesus' knees and although it doesn't say so, one could imagine that **Isaiah** falls to his knees when he is in the Temple and has his vision of God.

When we sing “O Holy Night” at Christmas and get to the words, “Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices,” we don't *really* fall on our knees. We're Presbyterians, that's way too dramatic, even theatrical, right? And if we were to go to our knees, it would be controlled and dignified, right? But, we don't because we don't even have kneelers in the pews.

Falling to one's knees seems a natural response when encountering the Holy but in our western world it isn't common. Oh, we might see it as a sign of respect, especially towards royalty. Or perhaps our closest reference as Americans is when watching Game of Thrones on Sunday nights and one is asked to “Bend the Knee!” But falling to one's knees, as a spontaneous and natural gesture of utter humility in the presence of the Holy, is different because Holiness is the presence of God.

So what *is* Holy? How do you know? Defining what is Holy seems impossible to pin down because it is so deeply personal. One might call an encounter *Holy* because they see God there: in a place, a person, a thing or a circumstance...for some it might even be music. Listening to Carol and Meredith on the way home from the airport last night, it was clear there were many such encounters while in Galveston this past week. All these things can be holy. It is in the eye and heart of the beholder. We might not fall to our knees as some in bible do, but when we encounter something holy, we know. It takes our breath away, we can't speak, tears come to the eyes, the hairs raise on the back of our neck but perhaps the clearest sign is... goose bumps.

Can you remember the last time you had goose bumps...I'll give you a moment to remember...

Remember? Do you remember that "Oh wow," feeling when the goose bumps appear on your arms, or start in the middle of your back and spreads up your spine? Our nervous system was designed to alert us that something's happening! Pay attention! Like Isaiah, in an instant you become keenly aware that you are witness to--part of--something much greater than yourself.

I remember on December 24th, 1968, fifty years ago, was one of the first times I felt like that. I was ten years old. We didn't usually go to church on Christmas Eve. My dad was one of those who went every Sunday with my mom, but he figured there was someone out there who only went on Christmas Eve and so they could have his seat. But this Christmas Eve, it was important to be home and watching TV. I'm sure you were doing the same thing; they estimate that a quarter of the world's population was watching that night. My dad, being the scientist that he is, had explained to us that this was the very first time in human history that people had gone out in space far enough to escape the gravitational field of the earth. And this was the first time that any human being had ever seen the far side of the moon. And at 7:30 that Christmas Eve, the astronauts from Apollo 8 were going to turn on their camera and speak to the world as they orbited the moon. As we watched from our living room, the astronauts pointed their camera out the little window at the lunar landscape, and then commander Frank Borman read, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was without form and void, and darkness was across the face of the deep . . ." And goose bumps went up my spine... Those of you old enough to remember, did you feel that too? (look around, include choir) That told me something very important was happening. As I was just a boy, I remember wondering: Is God speaking to me? Was it an encounter with the Holy? I will remember it that way.

And these encounters continued. Just last week as I stood up here and we sang that old familiar hymn, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,” I was just singing away as normal, but then we got to the last two lines of the last verse, “ever singing, march we onward, victors in the midst of strife, joyful music leads us sunward in the triumph song of life.” And there it was...Goose bumps. If I could have dropped to my knees without hurting myself, I might have done that.

Do you remember St. Francis of Assisi? He was riding high on his horse and he reached down to touch a man filled with leprosy and puss. As Francis reached down to pick up the man, he saw the face of Jesus in that man with leprosy. He experienced the holiness of God in that moment and Francis was transformed.

Some speak of seeing the spirit of a departed love one, in the actions of animal, like a bird, a squirrel, the deep gaze of puppy. These are all encounters with the Holy.

Or did you know that for Martin Luther, he experienced the Holiness of God while in his room, reading the book of Romans, the verses about the grace of God.

C. S. Lewis told of getting on a bus and rode from his home to a cathedral through the countryside of England. When he left home, he did not believe in God When he arrived after his brief journey, he did. He didn't quite know what happened but he had an experience of God. He knew the holiness of Christ, the holiness of God.

So, it could be an experience with another person, you might be by yourself riding a bus, you might be reading the Bible. You might see the majesty of nature or it could happen to you even in church.

But when you get those goose bumps, when you get that feeling that all of a sudden you are getting a vision of something greater than yourself, when you get that sense that somehow God himself is close

to you, two things often happen. The first is that you feel inadequate. Isaiah does. “Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips . . .” Simon Peter feels the same way, “Depart from me O Lord for I am a sinful man.” Often we are struck by our own insignificance when we have an experience of the holy. It is not a false modesty or a sign of poor self-esteem. Holiness strips away all our pretense and we see everything anew, the past life is no longer adequate, our past behaviors no longer tolerable. We have an openness of mind and spirit because the grace of God was shown to us and we must show it to others. Like, Isaiah and Peter, who were small, insignificant men. But their encounter with the holy changed them, and they, in turn changed the world.

The other thing that happens when we encounter the holy is that the world around us begins to not look so good. Isaiah was called by God and called to say some harsh words to his nation and his people.

When we see something or someone that is holy, we also see all that our world and ourselves are not, or at least are not yet. And sometimes that makes us angry or sad or even despairing. Isaiah could have despaired because of all the things his people Israel were not, what failures they were in following God. Peter could have despaired because of the task ahead of him. How am I going to attract people? I’ve never done that before. But the key is not in thinking about the results and despairing that we will ever get there, the key is being faithful to your call. I think the key verse in the passage from Isaiah is not “here am I send me,” but the very last verse, “The holy seed is its stump.”

Things might look bad. You’ve encountered the holy and you’ve seen all that our world, our community, our church, ourselves are not. You’ve been able to see all that we lack, all the problems we have, all the things we should be that we are not. And you don’t know how we are ever going to get there, to where our world is holy, where our church is holy and blessed, where we ourselves are grown up into the likeness of Christ. How is that ever going to happen? But the seeds are all around us.

Isaiah just saw a stump—God said “that’s a seed of the kingdom!” Peter just saw himself and his brother and his friends as simple, unlearned Galilean fishermen—Jesus said, “you are seed and building

blocks of my church!” Apollo 8 left the earth in December of 1968 after a hard year. Dr. King and Robert Kennedy were killed. The Democratic convention prompted riots in Chicago. The war in Vietnam raged through the Tet offensive. And as they circled the moon they saw that famous image of the earth, blue and beautiful, rising over the lunar horizon, and perhaps they heard God say, “all this I have created and behold it is very good, and there was evening and there was morning, another day.” Do we see seeds? Growth? The little bits of love and joy and peace and patience and all the other fruits of the spirit. And when we see them, when we see the fruit of the Spirit actually growing, do we get those goose bumps because we know God is here?

In a few minutes we are going to ordain and install new elders and deacons to lead our church. They are people beloved by God and by us whom we believe God is calling. And they are responding “Here I am, send me.” And we are grateful for each one of them.