

Sermon for the Ordination of Priests
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Recently, I was driving home at the end of a long day. The last thing on the schedule had been a meeting that did not go well. As I drove, my stomach was turning with the self-doubt and second-guessing we all know. To try to pray through it, I switched on a contemporary setting of the hymn we just sang: “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.” Maybe it was the beautiful spring sunset, maybe it was the fact that I had just been so inescapably confronted with my own limits, or maybe I was hallucination level tired, but I had an almost mystical experience as I listened to that hymn over, and over, and over, the whole cosmos focused by every glorious turn of phrase. “Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light. nor wanting, nor wasting.” “To all life thou givest, to all great and small. In all life thou livest, the true life of all.” “Thy justice like mountains high soaring above. Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.” As I sat with this magnificent meditation on the paradox of God who is both utterly incomprehensible, and closer to us than our own heartbeat, everything slowed way down, and I was buoyed along by an overwhelming peace, feeling a liberating sense of smallness against the vastness of God.

It wasn't exactly Isaiah's vision in today's Old Testament lesson, but it felt Isaiah adjacent. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah's stomach was turning, too. The brutal Assyrian empire was ascendant, and it was clear that Israel was next in their sights. Uzziah had been a good king, a faithful ruler. What was coming next, not so much.

Then things get weird. Isaiah sees the Maker, creepy seraphs are flying around, hiding their faces from God's magnificence like in the hymn, and then one flies at him, sings his lips, so unclean with self-doubt and shame, and then he's free and new! When the divine council asks who will be their messenger, he doesn't play the false humility of other prophets, whom God has to coax and cajole into it. As soon as the call comes, he's brings the whole heartedness of a child: pick me! Pick me!

In the Bible, encounters with God are weird like this. They are scary and disorienting, because when you meet the God of the Bible, God will change you.

We have largely lost the sense of God's liberating and life-giving weirdness. Over the last few centuries, we've tried to make God reasonable and sensible, but I'm afraid we've just made God boring. What passes for normal in our world isn't good. What passes for normal is massive injustices, unimaginable suffering. What passes for normal is children being gunned down in schools. What passes for normal is a country that feels like it's on the brink of civil war. What passes for normal is generational wealth for some on the mostly black and brown backs of others. In this world, my friends, weird is good news.

So part of what we need priests for is to make like Isaiah, and keep the faith weird. Part of what we need priests to do is remind us that God's power is a real thing, that we won't be saved by our own efforts, but by only by the God who gives to all life, and is the true life of all. We need priests who will point us to the lip singing salvation of God's love. And you can only give us that

if you're going into the temple and letting those seraphs burn you up in prayer every single day.
Keep the faith weird for us.

But this isn't their work alone. Our gospel lesson today is Jesus sending out the first twelve apostles. We are told that Jesus was going around teaching and preaching the good news, and curing the sick. In the verses that follow what we heard, he sends them out to do the exact same. Jesus' own ministry wasn't just about doing the things, it was about sending others to do the same things he did. Jesus was sent in order to send others, and that chain continues unbroken to this day. The apostles sent other apostles who we now call bishops. The bishops send the priests and deacons, and the priests and deacons send the whole people of God. We have different functions but we all have the same job: proclaim the good news, point to God's power which alone can heal, bring the life-giving weirdness of God to a world that feels so much like death.

I talk a lot about our lay led and clergy supported future. Part of what that means is that we are ordaining and sending these priests not to do all the things on our behalf, but to send the whole people of God into the world to look and act like Jesus, wherever any of us are. If there is to be a future at all for our church, it will not be because we have more money or better liturgy, or no more problems with our buildings. It will be because all of us know that we are sent into the world by our sending God to announce the weird good news that he is risen, that death has died, that love has won, that we are already free. If there is a future for our church, it will be because we are all sent out in an unhinged and contagious joy, looking like mobilized love. We aren't ordaining these eight to do the work of the church, or to save the church. We are ordaining them to help us be the church, together, out in God's world.

And I love all of you too much to lie to you. It's not going to be easy. A lot of your days will feel the way mine did several weeks ago. I've been a priest of this church for almost half of my life now. As I look out on the challenges before us, the bad news as I see it is our dear old church just isn't up to it. I honestly don't think we have it in us. But God does. I know that in the deepest part of my bones because for twenty years I have felt it in every hard moment, and at the end of every beautiful and weary day. God, and God alone can meet the challenges in front of us. The good news is, and I checked this just to make sure, I am not the Lord, and our new priests are not the Lord, and none of us gathered here is the Lord, despite the expectations we place on ourselves and each other. Jesus, crucified and risen, is the Lord, and his resurrection has already secured the only victory that makes any difference, so we can give ourselves and each other a break.

God's future will look different than anything we can imagine. That was true for Isaiah, and true for the apostles, and true in every generation right down to this moment. We can't see it or force it, no matter how much we wear ourselves out trying. Our job, each one of us, is to let those seraphs come and set us on fire with the power of God's love. Go into the temple, go to the altar in your heart every single day, and let God's weird power do its thing. And then let's give our whole selves to God, and get out of God's way, until the whole world dazzles with the power of love, perfectly and gloriously done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

