AbbeyChurch Reflection Feb 10 2019 | Better Out Than In

Isaiah 6:1-8, (9-13) | Psalm 138  | 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 | Luke 5:1-11

Hi my name is Vanessa and it’s an honor to be a friend of AbbeyChurch (like good friend). Every time I’ve shared something from upfront, some one of you finds me and says something nice. And when I describe or recommend you to people I usually say something about how well, or creatively, you hold multiple things in tension (that I don’t normally see held together), like in this gathering, there’s both intimacy and reverence for me. So I’m challenged and inspired being around you.

WIth that said, following the lectionary is still fairly new to me, and I can’t believe my landlord prepares something EVERY WEEK from it because there’s so much going on! Must get better with practice.

**PASSAGES**

Lucky for me, I think today’s 4 passages have a magical (and fairly obvious) theme. We have **Isaiah 6** (SLIDE): I’m not going to read through them all, but just highlight something in each….

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| Isaiah 6:1-8  A Vision of God in the Temple  **6** 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. **2** 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. **3** And one called to another and said:  “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”  **4** The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. **5** *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!”*  **6** Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. **7** 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.” **8** 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!” |

And **Psalm 138** (SLIDE):

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| Psalm 138 The Message  A David Psalm  **1-3** Thank you! Everything in me says “Thank you!”     Angels listen as I sing my thanks.  I kneel in worship facing your holy temple     and say it again: “Thank you!”  Thank you for your love,     thank you for your faithfulness;  Most holy is your name,     most holy is your Word.  The moment I called out, you stepped in;     you made my life large with strength.  **4-6** When they hear what you have to say, God,     all earth’s kings will say “Thank you.”  They’ll sing of what you’ve done:     “How great the glory of God!”  And here’s why: God, high above, sees far below;     no matter the distance, he knows everything about us.  **7-8** When I walk into the thick of trouble,     keep me alive in the angry turmoil.  With one hand     strike my foes,  With your other hand     save me.  Finish what you started in me, God.     Your love is eternal—don’t quit on me now. | Psalm 138 NRSV  Thanksgiving and Praise Of David.  **1** I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;     before the gods I sing your praise;  **2** I bow down toward your holy temple     and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness;     for you have exalted your name and your word     above everything.  **3** On the day I called, you answered me,     you increased my strength of soul.  **4** All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord,     for they have heard the words of your mouth.  **5** They shall sing of the ways of the Lord,     for great is the glory of the Lord.  **6** For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly;     but the haughty he perceives from far away.  **7** Though I walk in the midst of trouble,     you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;  you stretch out your hand,     and your right hand delivers me.  **8** The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me;     your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.     Do not forsake the work of your hands. |

Here we have a psalm of David, after he’s had a crisis, and come out on the other side. It’s unclear what it was, but it was some day(s) of trouble/distress - could have been physical illness, financial problems, relational problems (fight with his wife?), military threat, or spiritual struggle (that sinking feeling when you wonder whether the arc of the universe does bend toward justice or not; when tempted to despair?). Although we don’t know what it was, we know that on the other side of that, he took time to write this/sing this.

I have to admit I struggled when I first read this psalm because the *real dramatic thanking ones* usually sound a bit inauthentic or flowery to me (probably because I live largely insulated from the basic crises a lot of the world lives with...). But it’s more than that too -  I think it’s because although praying or begging in a time of crisis is familiar to me, **thanking with as much passion and urgency isn’t.** I think of the few crises I’ve had in my life, when I’ve been really scared, or felt really humiliated or ashamed, or been afraid of losing someone - and I cried and cried out, hard. Sometimes no words, but if words, pretty dramatic words. CAN BE HELPFUL to, insert one of those memories of crisis before this psalm… and then read, “I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart… On that awful day I cried myself to sleep, you answered me, I survived, you’re teaching me how to grieve or forgive or be restored… and am healing….” (That’s my paraphrase of the psalm)

And **1 Cor. 15** (SLIDE): 2 Notable things here:

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| 1 Corinthians 15:1-11  The Resurrection of Christ  **15** Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, **2** through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.  **3** For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, **4** and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, **5** and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. **6** Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. **7** Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. **8** Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. **9** For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. **10** But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. **11** Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe. |

After reminding them of the gospel in a kind of sequence format (this happened, then this then this), We have Paul calling himself the “least of the apostles” and “unfit to be called one.” A confession of lowliness that reminds me of Isaiah with this self-identification of being u**nclean/unfit…**

And then verse 10 is one that I adopted as my own during college. “By the grace of God, I am what I am; his grace toward me is not without effect” (was the translation I adopted it in). When I read that as a people-pleasing, very image-conscious 20 year old (oops not much has changed), not really being able to tell what I wanted apart from what strong personalities around me wanted or what I thought would be most attractive (even spiritually attractive), I thought: *Wow, one day, I hope something radically changes, and that’s what they say about me, wha****t I*** *say about me; that’s what I want written on my tombstone: “By the grace of God, Vanessa was Vanessa; God’s grace to her was not without effect.”*Especially loved the subtlety of that phrase: Grace to me was not without effect. Said positively: God’s grace to me worked, it succeeded, it changed me, it got into me, it made a difference!. (Most improved player 3 years in a row… either embarrassing or you could see it how I did: I was real fertile soil for improvement; improvable!)

Lastly, **Luke 5** (slide):

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| Luke 5:1-11  Jesus Calls the First Disciples  **5** Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, **2** he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. **3** He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. **4** When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” **5** Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” **6** When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. **7** So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. **8** But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” **9** For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; **10** and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” **11** When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. |

And Peter’s response reminds me of Isaiah and Paul: falls to the ground and says “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Whereas Isaiah witnesses an abundance of ROBE and chanting, Simon witnessed an abundance of fish where there had not been any and the extravagance/otherness of it caused this reaction.

**MEANING**

So that’s the magical theme I noticed (SLIDE) -

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| “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!”  -Isaiah | “I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly..”  -David |
| “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.”  -Paul | “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”  -Simon |

that these four guys in these 4 different moments of history (David 1000 years before Jesus, Isaiah 700 years before Jesus, Simon *with* Jesus, and Paul a couple decades after the death of Jesus) all have these declarations of contrition, unworthiness, and lowliness (admit the psalm is the weakest link in terms of theme, but it’s implied because this is the day-after contrition response…)

What it makes ME think is that it must MATTER WHAT WE SAY, it matters that we tell the truth, - it matters that there is some avenue for HONEST EXPRESSION to God in our lives. It’s POSSIBLE to imagine that these four guys may have not have had these vulnerable display of feelings - they may have walked away, or shoved it down, or pulled out their iphone or something……

We have a friend in Philadelphia who is a therapist and if you ask him why he does his job he’ll say: ***Better Out Than In.*** 9x outta 10 it is better for stuff to come out than it is to stay in. That’s the macro thing I hear from these 4 passages: better out than in. The challenge, or the task, is how to BE HONEST - how to be vulnerable, how to live in such a way where sacred moments like in these passages happen.

**Some of my background inspiration for agreeing with my friend: that it’s better to get truth out than to keep it in - is that I think if we don’t prioritize honest expression or engagement - with God, ourselves, and others - all the “in” stuff can kind of get looped into worry or anxiety, and I, at least, chronically** underestimate worry’s corrosive effects on my life. I tend not to think of worry as a sin, more like an endearing quality because “Oh, I just care so much,” (like in an interview they ask for weaknesses and you say, “Working too hard”) but I think worrying is a sin, in that it

* wreaks havoc on our nervous systems,
* it doesn’t tell us the truth about the nature of God/reality,
* and sucks up a LOT of our energy.

Mark Twain said great things, including (SLIDE): “I’m an old man now and have had a great many problems…. Most of them never happened.” (Speaking of tombstone, don’t want that but could very likely be mine!)

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| “I am an old man now and have had a great many problems.  Most of them never happened.”  – Mark Twain |

Or my favorite prayer from Henri Nouwen ends with (same SLIDE): “Let me see and hear what is really real, and let me have the courage to keep unmasking the endless unrealities, which disturb my life every day…” When I first read that at 22 was the first time I realized there ARE endless unrealities and YES they DO disturb my life every day. The question of course is: how do you get in touch with what’s really real, which inspires the unmasking of endless unrealities??

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| Let me see and hear what is really real,  and let me have the courage to keep unmasking the endless unrealities,  which disturb my life every day…  - Henri Nouwen |

But first, also want to say that BETTER OUT THAN (or living in a way where honest and vulnerable expression is a value) is not just so that we feel better, we have less anxiety, our experience of life is better (which is the legitimate criticism sometimes of contemplatives or prayers…. That it’s an insulation from the world rather than deeper engagement with it) -

* But what these 4 guys had with God and Jesus was ultimately better for the sake of the world TOO, IN THAT the pressures in our lives, the PACE of our lives, the “endless unrealities” that may be burdening us, totally make a difference for whether we respond compassionately to what happens around us.
* I often think kof Miroslav Volf’s book title: *Exclusion and Embrace.* Every embrace of something (consciously or not) is an exclusion of something else; every yes of our attention and time is a no to something else. How busy we are, what we are giving our time and energy to is NOT NOTHING. There is a  definite cost to living vulnerably, or to putting in the work to be able to mine for and labor toward being more honest, expressing ourselves more honestly, BUT what I can forget is that THERE IS ALSO A COST to not living awake, sensitive, penetrable (gaining the world but losing my soul, for example).

**APPLICATION**

A few applications that came to mind for me:

**First invitation I hear is to become more know-able more than being someone who knows good stuff** - knowable to myself, to others, and to God. Seems like a little thing, but it kind of turns things upside down for me.

* Like when planning to go on a retreat, instead of coming up with this full agenda of all the things I’m going to read and do and and learn about God, I can instead reframe the goal from trying hard to know God more → becoming more knowable - more known by God.
* When I do sit down to use BCP to read the Bible, instead of getting into accumulation of information mode, I can let it read me - one’s about *doing (agent)*, and one’s about *being done to.*
* When I’m hanging out with Steven or a friend or an acquaintance at Kindergarten pick-up, instead expending energy trying to come up with something substantial to offer whoever I’m with, or something to say to them or do for them, I can focus on becoming more knowable - showing more and more of me, and letting that be the “offering” (come to think of it… there is a phrase in the Bible about being “living sacrifice” and that makes me wonder if that’s what it means: I don’t bring or find or formulate the offering; rather *I am the offering; all of us are.*)
* SOME of you are good at being knowable. Our roommate is listening to this thinking: I know everything she ever thinks about and feels! ***My question for you: what’s the translation of that for you? What does vulnerability look like for you? What would cause you trust God more, to have to engage with your honest feelings more? To become more you?***

**One definite barrier for me** - that keeps me blind to the what God is doing in the world, or opportunities to fall to my knees in response to God’s work, is how many distractions I have at my fingertips all the time - distractions that keep my deeper, uncomfortable feelings at bay.

* Reminder: unplug; don’t pull out phone if I’m 10 minutes early. What if I feel bored? What if I feel restless? What if I feel stupid sitting in the hall. WHat if I feel antsy? Yeah, what if?
* Henri Nouwen - before the iphone - talked about how it’s hard to be occupied with whatever God wants to give us, involve us in when we are always already SO PREOCCUPIED. That’s so often me - half way through a to-do list, and moving onto the next thing.
* ***So, a question for you: what prevents you from facing your emotions, your state, your fears? There’s a reason, and it’s not bad… but maybe an “I want to want to prayer….?”***

**And lastly, it reminds me that it’s God’s goodness,** or kindness, that leads us to repentance (like Paul says earlier in Romans). These four guys didn’t cry out in a vacuum, and we aren’t expected to “get contrite” out of the blue either. Confession is *always already* a response to God’s prior goodness, beauty, abundance, display of wonder, otherness.

* Which begs the question - how do you get closer to beauty, or hope, or love? What makes you come alive, what gives you energy to not lose heart or despair? The Ignatian idea for this is consolation: what activities, interactions, or practices bring you toward God (even if it’s not necessarily a “pretty” thing; like being more “knowable” feels quite risky for me sometimes, but it’s a consolation in that it brings me to Jesus’ feet; whereas something wonderful like a compliment sometimes doesn’t bring me to Jesus’ feet - it reinforces this pressure I feel to be someone worthy of others’ compliments… see: creating two different kinds of people.)
* Find your consolations and give yourself and those you love permission to explore those, experiment with those, include those in your life.

One thing that is a consolation for me is the JP. My mom taught me the Jesus Prayer (SLIDE) when I was 16.

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| The Jesus Prayer  Luke 18:13: “O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.” (A tax collector)  +  Luke 18:39: “Son of David, have mercy on me!” (The blind beggar)  =  Inhale*:* *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,*  Exhale: *Have Mercy on me, a sinner.* |

She went back to work after years at home with the 4 of us, and worked at Robinsons May Department Store at nights. I asked her how she could stand folding the sweaters and hanging up the bras and dresses on the hangers (thinking it must have felt meaningless) and she was a bit surprised and said, “Oh, it’s actually such a great way to pray the Jesus Prayer.” For her, the Jesus Prayer was a gift, a salve to her soul, because it was about God’s beauty.

Probably because of her, it has the same effect on me.  It doesn’t start with “I’m a sinner,” but with talking to God: “Lord Jesus Christ” - You, You who exist and are listening to me, astonishingly, gorgeously, **to You who made the first move,** to You in response I say have mercy on me, a sinner. (it’s like Jerry MaGuire: You had me at hello!) So, far from depressing me, it dignifies me, it lifts my chin to notice the beauty of God coming to dine with us and do dishes with us and go to work with us, and suffer with us, and die with us, and eventually to rise with us.

* ***So, my question for you is: What gives you hope? What lifts your chin? What storylines or activities are like a salve for your soul? Can you entertain the possibility that that is a display of God’s beauty and can you, can we, move closer to it this week? Can we value the work and the gift of becoming more ourselves?***