

HOLY AND HAZARDOUS

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Isaiah 6:1-8

A man takes his Great Dane for a walk to the grocery store. At the grocery store the man ties his Great Dane to a tree next to the sidewalk outside the store. He goes inside to do some shopping. A little while later, another man comes over to him and asks if the Great Dane outside is his. He replies that it is and then the other man says, "Well, I'm sorry to tell you this, but I believe my dog just killed your dog." The owner of the Great Dane looks at him and asks what kind of dog he has, to which he replies that he has a Chihuahua. The Great Dane's owner looks at the other man as if he's lost his mind and asks, "How could that be?" The other man replies, "Well, I'm afraid he choked on him."

I have to admit, I am a dog person. We've had cats in our household but we didn't get along. I prefer dogs. The last dog I had died of old age at age 16. At some point, I hope to get another one.

Dogs are interesting creatures. We know them to be our best friends, our companions, our guards and our guides, our helpers. It is widely accepted that dogs evolved from wolves. However, exactly how this happened is the source of a great deal of disagreement among scientists—archaeologists, biologists, geneticists, and more. There are two prevailing hypotheses over the origin of dogs. The first states that people domesticated wolves. The second claims that wolves domesticated themselves. This evolution took place between ten and thirty-thousand years ago. The first theory of the origin of dogs states that humans captured and bred the wolves that exhibited desirable characteristics. The second theory suggests that certain wolves became hangers-on at the edge of human encampments attracted by human trash and leftover carcasses. Over time, through a process of self-selection, these wolves bred and evolved into more dog-like animals. The truth is probably a combination of these two theories.

The larger question is not how did dogs evolve, but where. Scientists have narrowed the location down to either Europe or Asia.¹ The latest theory is based on DNA research and states that dogs evolved simultaneously in the east (China) and the west (Europe). Then, travelers from the east brought their dogs to the west where the populations interbred giving us dogs as we know them today.

In this process of domestication, wolves changed in body and temperament. Their skulls, teeth, and paws shrank. Their ears flopped. They gained a docile

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/06/the-origin-of-dogs/484976/>

disposition, becoming both less frightening and less fearful. They learned to read the complex expressions that ripple across human faces. Wolves became dogs.

We may never know the truth of what happened, of exactly how we got from wolves to dogs. But we do know that the domestication of dogs changed the world. Dogs are the first animals that humans domesticated, that we changed to meet our own needs. Over time, we became exceptional at domesticating plants and animals and even our environment to better suit our needs.

Humans have a habit of domesticating the things in our world. If there is a wilderness, we want to tame it. If there is a mountain we want to climb it. If there is a swamp, we want to drain it. If there is a desert, we want to flood it. If there is a wild animal, we want to place it in a cage and make it our pet. We are good at doing these things. And, we do the same with God.

From the beginning, we have sought to domesticate God, to transform God into our image, to tame God, to make God smaller, to make God fit our expectations; we strive to make God like us.

Today, we read from the prophesy of Isaiah, specifically, Isaiah's vision in which he is called to become a prophet for God.

Isaiah was prophet of the southern kingdom of Judea in the 8th century BC. He served as a prophet during the administrations of four different kings of Judea. He was a leading voice in the nation.

In the book of Isaiah, Isaiah presents us with this incredible vision of God. Isaiah is in the temple and he sees the Lord there sitting on a great throne. The throne is elevated and God is high above him. To give an idea of the scale of God's presence, Isaiah notes that the hem of God's robe fills the temple. Isaiah is standing on the floor of the temple, God is seated high above him, and God's garment fills the room.

God is not alone in the temple but is attended to by mythical creatures—six-winged seraphs who are flying through the room. The seraphs call out to one another saying, *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory*. Their voices are so loud that they cause the foundations of the temple to shake. The word *seraph* literally means “burning ones” and from their presence, smoke fills the room.

Standing in the enormity of God's presence, Isaiah is forced confess his own unworthiness saying, *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!*

In response to this confession, one of the seraphs flies to Isaiah. The seraph has a pair of tongs and is holding a live coal that has been taken from the fire on the

altar. The seraph touches Isaiah's mouth with the coal saying, *Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.* Above Isaiah, God proclaims, *Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?* Isaiah responds in faith saying, *Here am I; send me.*

This vision of Isaiah has become a model for worship for us. The story can be outlined into four sections that correspond to our own outline for worship.

First, there is the praise section where Isaiah sees the Lord. The seraphs are singing *the whole earth if full of his glory.* This is an invitation for us to come to worship.

Second is the confession section where Isaiah declares that he is unclean and not worthy to be in the holy presence. This is followed by an act of forgiveness where the seraph burns away the sin of his lips with a hot coal. How about this, what if next week I bring in my grill and set fire to some charcoal briquettes and let them get hot and offer to place them on your lips following your confession. After all, it is our lips that are the source of most of our sins. I doubt I will get any takers, but I believe we understand what Isaiah is teaching us.

Third, the word of God is proclaimed with the question, "Who will go?"

And, finally, there is the response of the people, *Send me.*

This is more than a vision. It is reality that Isaiah is describing. Every sense is engaged. Isaiah sees God sitting on the throne; he hears the seraphs calling to one another; he smells the smoke; he feels the temple shaking; he tastes the burning coal with his lips. Isaiah's encounter with God is a reminder of God's power and mystery. It tells us that not only is God's size incomprehensible, but that God is wild and dangerous, God is not something we can tame or domesticate. In God's presence we become small.

In C.S. Lewis' book **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**, we can read of the adventures of four children in the magical kingdom of Narnia. When in Narnia, the children are befriended by Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, who tell them about the king of Narnia, a being named Aslan.

"Is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. Certainly not.... Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great lion."

"ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

Mrs. Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver; ...Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

Today is the day on the church calendar known as Trinity Sunday, a day to honor the theological doctrine of the Trinity, which admittedly is not the most exciting day of the year. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that God is Father, Son, and Spirit. Last Sunday was Pentecost Sunday when we celebrated the gift of the Holy Spirit to the followers of Christ in Jerusalem. We mark that day as the birth of the church. From there, the followers of Jesus carried the good news into the world. At that point, some in the church may have proclaimed that they were followers of the Son alone, while others laid claim to the Father, and still others rejoiced in the Spirit. You can see how the church may have divided over this. The purpose of the doctrine of the Trinity is not to chop God into three pieces, but instead to multiply our understanding of who God is. We cannot reduce or domesticate God.

We gather in this place every week to worship. We hear the call to worship, we confess and are forgiven, we listen for God’s word, and we respond. I would hope that when you walk through the doors of this church that you do so with appropriate *fear and trembling*². You should be anxious at encountering the holy in the place.

We gather in this place not to domesticate God, not to make God in our image. We gather in this place as a renewal of Creation. Do you recall the words of Genesis? *Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness”* (Gen 1:26). We gather in this place to be made into God’s image.

My prayer each week is this: I pray that when you hear the call to worship that you recognize the glory of the Lord. I pray that the presence of God will compel you to confess your sins. I pray that you will accept God’s forgiveness and hear God’s holy word and then respond with the most powerful words of our faith, *Send me*.

² Philippians 2:12