

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

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Isaiah 6:1-8

A few months back I mentioned in a sermon about how my family acquired a dog last summer. Yes, it is our COVID canine, our pandemic puppy. We named him Eddy. Now, after nine months with us, the dog loves my daughter. She's teaching him tricks. They play in the yard. He sleeps under her bed. He also adores my wife. When she works from home, he curls up at her feet. He also helps with her paperwork which means that he shreds legal pads into confetti.

But then there is me. Eddy is still terrified of me. When I enter a room, he scurries out. If I try to pet him, he flinches. Even a slice of steak won't bring him over to me. Clearly, someone before us had abused him. It was probably a man. And that makes me angry that someone would treat a dog like that.

But I'm also frustrated because Eddy's behavior toward me is a blatant violation of our contract. You know, the "man's best friend" clause that is supposed to exist between dogs and their humans. This was not part of the deal. It's their job to like us. It's what we designed them to do. You might say that God created dogs. Nope. God created wolves. We took God's wolves and turned them into poodles. We domesticated wolves to serve us and work for us. And now, dogs watch our flocks, they guard our homes, they entertain us, they comfort us. They are our friends. We would never let a wolf near our children, but we trust our dogs.

How we got from wolf to dog is a story that scientists are still trying to unravel. There are two prevailing hypotheses over the origin of dogs. The first states that people domesticated wolves. The second theory states that wolves, in fact, domesticated themselves. Now, both of these theories set the date of this evolution as taking place between ten and thirty-thousand years ago—well before written history.

The first theory 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, 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 they originated. DNA research¹ suggests that dogs evolved simultaneously in both China and Europe.

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

Then, travelers from the east brought their animals to the west where the populations interbred giving us the dogs as we know them today.

In this process of domestication, wolves were changed in body and temperament. Their skulls, teeth, and paws shrank. Their ears flopped. They gained a docile disposition, becoming both less frightening and less fearful. They learned to read the complex expressions on human faces.

We will likely never know exactly how we got from wolves to dogs, but we do know that the domestication of dogs changed our world. Dogs are the first animals that humans reshaped to meet our own needs. Over time, we have become exceptional at domesticating plants and animals and even our environment to meet our whims.

The exception, of course, is cats. We have never domesticated cats. Cats domesticated us.

Humans have a habit of domesticating the things in our world. If there is a wilderness, we want to settle 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 tame it. We are good at doing these things. And, we try to do the same with God.

From the very beginning, believers have sought to domesticate our God, to transform God into our image, to tame God, to make God smaller, to make God safer, to make God work for us. Our goal has been to make God as much like us as possible

Today is Trinity Sunday and on this day we read from the Old Testament prophesy of Isaiah, specifically, Isaiah's vision in which he is called to become a prophet for God. And in this vision, we are shown a God who is wilder and more unbounded than anything we can imagine.

Isaiah was one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. We read his words frequently as part of our worship.

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

In our reading for today, Isaiah presents us with this incredible vision of God. In this vision, Isaiah describes himself as entering an immense temple and there he finds the Lord sitting on a great throne. The throne is elevated and God is far above him. To give an idea of the scale of God's presence, Isaiah tells us 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. Really, there is no scale

that can describe the enormity of God's being. You might as well try to measure the Grand Canyon with a yardstick.

God is not alone in the temple but is attended to by frightening mythical creatures—six-winged seraphs flying through the room. As they fly, the seraphs cry out to one another, *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 temple itself to shake. This word *seraph*—the name of these creatures—literally means “burning ones.” They are creatures of fire. Their smoke fills the room.

Standing there, alone, in the enormity of God's presence, Isaiah is forced confess his own unworthiness. He does so because God's purity magnifies our own impurity. When we are in God's presence we become fully cognizant of our unworthiness. And so, when he is confronted with his own sin, Isaiah cries out, *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!* Yet, despite being a sinner, he is still welcomed into the presence of the Lord.

In response to this confession, one of the seraphs flies down to Isaiah. The seraph has a pair of tongs and is holding a live coal taken from the fire on the altar. The seraph touches Isaiah's mouth with the coal and says, *Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out*. High in the heavens, Isaiah hears God's voice inquire, *Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?* Isaiah responds to God in faith saying, *Here am I; send me*.

This vision that Isaiah offers us is his attempt to describe the process of his being called into God's service. His call to become a prophet was not something to be taken lightly. He is not a teenager applying for a summer job. He is entering into a holy vocation.

I remember when I was ordained into the ministry. Even after thirty years, I can still remember the weight of the hands of the ministers and elders on my head. It is a weight that I carry to this day.

What we find in this vision has become our model for worship. In this vision, we recognize the four elements which shape our worship today: praise, confession, forgiveness, and sending.

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

Second is the confession where Isaiah declares that he is unclean and not worthy to be in God's holy presence.

The confession is followed by an act of forgiveness—the seraph taking a hot coal and burning away Isaiah's sin.

Lastly, the word of God is proclaimed with that question, “Who will go?” And Isaiah responds, *Send me*.

In this vision, 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 shake; he tastes the burning coal. Worship should engage us fully and completely. It should carry us to another place. Isaiah’s encounter with God is a declaration 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 anything we can tame or domesticate. God is great.

One of my favorite book series is the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis. In the first book, **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**, we read the adventures of four children in the magical kingdom of Narnia. While 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.”

We come to this place every week to worship. We hear God’s call, 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 and that you are receptive to the call of the wild. We should always be overwhelmed with anxiety at the prospect of encountering the holy in the place.

But we come here with hope. The good news reminds us that God wants us here. Remember the words of creation: *Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.”*³ We come here because within us is a spark of the divine, an image of the holy.

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 respond with the most powerful words of our faith, *Send me*.

² Philippians 2:12

³ Genesis 1:26