

January 2025



From the Bishop:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might... Isaiah 6:3

Do you hear a song, or maybe a multitude of songs, when you read the words above? We know these words in hymnody – in traditional songs, in praise songs, as part of the Eucharistic liturgy, and more. These words are deep in the bones of the Church. Of course, like so many lyrics that we sing in church, they weren't created out of thin air. We first hear these words from seraphs during the strange and grand vision that Isaiah had when he entered the holiest of holy places in the Temple – the place that housed the ark of God, the place revered as God's earthly throne, the place where God was simultaneously present in the heavenly realm and within the fabric of the world. We hear these words in Isaiah's call story in [Isaiah 6:1-8](#). (Go ahead ... read the Isaiah story now before reading the rest of this article.)

As Isaiah enters into the Holy of Holies, God grants Isaiah a glimpse into God's celestial throne room. God is so magnificent and big that the hem of God's robe fills the temple. God is attended by fierce and fiery creatures – scary flying snakes with six wings called seraphim. These were not the cute cherubs holding flutes and harps. These were sea serpent-sized creatures singing (shrieking, screaming) in loud, ear-piercing voices, "*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty...*"

Isaiah is overcome. He falls on his knees and cries, "Woe is me!" Isaiah knows, in that moment, who the Creator of the universe is and what this Creator can do. Isaiah knows he could be destroyed in the flash of a second.

It needs to be said, of course, that Isaiah's vision didn't happen in a vacuum. Isaiah entered the holy of holies when the Assyrians were attacking and the people of Jerusalem were trying to barricade themselves against this most formidable army. Outside of the Temple it was a dark and scary time. For Isaiah, and the rest of the Judeans, the world felt frightening and terrifying and out-of-control.

Do you know this feeling? This feeling of being so small and powerless in a world that seems so big and overwhelming. This feeling of the world being topsy turvy and unpredictable. This feeling of not knowing what to do next because everything seems like too much to bear.

For Isaiah, the next thing that happens in his vision is that a huge seraph comes at him with a piece of burning coal and presses it to his lips. The pain must have been brutal. But when the coal touches Isaiah's lips, things are clarified for him – he is cleansed and he is prepared for what is coming next and he instantly pledges to God, "Here I am. Send me." And Isaiah becomes God's prophet. (If only things could be made this clear for all of us.)

In any case, what do we do with this strange and beautiful story? What does Isaiah's call story mean for us today? Please know that I cannot wrap this story up in a tidy bow – nor do I want to – because this isn't how life works. (Also, Isaiah couldn't either ... as much as Isaiah pledged to follow God, if you read [Isaiah 6:9-11](#) you'll hear Isaiah crying out, "How long, O Lord?"). But this is where I seize hope.

Above all things, God is God and we are not. God is wholly other. We cannot know the mind of God. And yet, in this extraordinary story, there are glimpses beyond majesty and awe. God is fearful to behold and God holds us as a mother holds a child to her breast. The touch of God burns and yet it is with life-giving fire. God towers above and God embraces us in inexplicable and earth-shattering tenderness and forgiveness. The One who creates all things also lives in the dirt and muck of life.

Dear Beloveds, may you always know and trust through all things: God is God. Almighty and Always. The One who shepherds you in life also tenderly holds you into death and beyond. The One who created the universe is as close as your next breath. For God gave you life, named you, and holds you near. Forever. *Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might.*

Amen.

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From the VEEP:

"Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy." John 16:20

Death is always a separation - however temporary - between the living and those who have died. As poet Emily Dickinson says, "Parting is all we know of heaven, And all we need of hell." Even when we know our loved ones have passed on to heaven, we still experience the pain of that separation. Sometimes, in the midst of the weeping and mourning, it is very hard to imagine that pain turning to joy.

In November the world lost two amazing women, both of whom were part of my extended church family. One, shortly after a diagnosis of terminal cancer and the other suddenly after being struck by a car while crossing the street. The first had time to plan for her passing, the other was caught by surprise. Both, though, had deep faith and lived rich and productive lives. In that way, both were ready for that next great adventure. Those of us left behind, however, had varying degrees of readiness. Knowing that Marcia had terminal cancer, we had time to tell her what she meant to us, to send cards and letters, to reminisce with her and her family. Kim's accident caught us off guard, unready to believe or accept what had happened.

Unfortunately, these two losses are not the only ones I've experienced this year. As a result, I've been looking for resources on how to become more resilient. Another amazing woman who is part of my extended church family and who is currently undergoing treatment for cancer herself, commended to me the work of Al Siebert, who wrote *The Resiliency Advantage*. For others who might be struggling to overcome trauma and loss, here are a couple tips I've gleaned:

- Assess and accept the new reality and determine what opportunities might now be available to you that weren't there before. Highly resilient survivors do not waste energy protesting against what has happened.

When my friend Marcia shared with us her terminal diagnosis, we were all in awe of how she handled it - with faith, grace, and practicality. She had the ability to accept the reality of a situation and not waste any energy on the things she couldn't change. She didn't bewail her misfortune or ask, "Why me?" Instead, she used the time she had to put her affairs in order, to plan her memorial service, to visit with friends and family, to create beautiful final memories for herself and others. She looked back on her life with no regrets, focusing on all the blessings she had been given.

- Ask yourself: What can I learn from the experience that is useful? What new strengths can I gain? What would be useful for me to do now?

Viewing a loss as also an opportunity for growth helps us to focus on what we have control over, relieving some of the helplessness we often feel in the face of tragedy - especially sudden loss. When I heard the news of Kim's sudden death, I was in shock, but I quickly tried to find ways that I could take action to bring something positive out of the tragic loss. One thing I learned was that Kim was an organ donor, and her death meant renewed life to at least three people. This knowledge pushed me to make sure my own donor information was up to date. I also sought out ways to honor her memory by supporting causes I knew were close to her heart. I am also striving to live my own life in such a way that when, whether suddenly or with advanced warning, it is my turn to depart, I will be ready.

Resilience is not always an easy trait to cultivate. Many of us get mired in weeping and grieving and forget God's promise that we who mourn will be comforted. We forget to seek the promised joy that is to follow. However, according to Dr. Siebert, "We have the ability to draw meaning and value out of horrible experiences. Painful memories can be neutralized by finding gifts in the experience. Trauma can lead to wisdom and become a door to a new and fulfilling life." As a wise man (Kim's husband Kirby) said to me, "Nothing will be the same again, but that doesn't mean it can't be good."

May you have a blessed and resilient season of Epiphany.

Here is what I and/or the Synod Council has been up to in December

- **Grants Task Force:** Met on December 4 to review recommendation for council for better funding of our synod ministries.
- **Executive Committee:** Met on December 12 to discuss, among other things, the recipients of annual endowment distributions.
- **Policy Committee:** Met on December 18 to continue the work of updating synod policies.