# High and Holy, With the Lowly (Isaiah 57:15; 66:1-2)

(Baccalaureate, 2011)

Each year as I’ve listened to Baccalaureate sermons I’ve wondered what on earth I might preach on if I were ever asked, and I’ve never known what was the answer. But of course I haven’t needed that information in the past. This March when the invitation came, I was working on particular verses in Isaiah 56 – 66, and I knew immediately that they were the subject for me to take up. Here is what Third Isaiah says:

The one who is high and towering has said this, the one who dwells forever, whose name is “Holy one”:

“I dwell on high and holy, and with the crushed and low in spirit,

In enlivening the spirit of the people who are low, enlivening the heart of the people who have been crushed.”

That’s chapter 57. And then chapter 66 restates the point:

“The heavens are my throne, the earth is my footstool.

Wherever could be the house that you would build for me, wherever the place that would be my abode,

When all these things my hand made; thus all these things came to be?...

But toward this person I look, toward one who is afflicted, struck down in spirit, trembling at my word.”

First, the prophet says, remember who God is. God is not your buddy. God is not someone with whom you partner. God is not merely someone who lives inside you. God is someone who is high and towering, high and holy. God is so high and so towering that the heavens are God’s throne and the earth is just God’s footstool. Think about it. The cosmos in all its immensity is God’s throne. God’s throne is not merely *in* the heavens. God’s throne *is* the heavens. God is much bigger than they are. So when God puts his feet up at the end of the day, the earth is what God puts his feet on.

What good news! God is not built to our scale. God is separate from us. If we went out of existence tomorrow, God would not go out of existence. God is great. That’s what Muslims believe. I wish we believed it. We are often more comfortable with the idea that God is close to us, that God is our friend, that we find God when we look inside us, that we discover the reality of God through being quiet. The Bible portrays God as immense and transcendent, high and towering.

So it acknowledges that reality about God. But it then adds that other thing that we *want* to know. “I dwell on high and holy, *and* I dwell with the crushed and low in spirit.” “I look toward this person: the one who is afflicted, struck down in spirit, trembling at my word.”

Now when the prophet describes people as “crushed” and “afflicted,” the translations assume the words refer to the person who is contrite, repentant, sorry for their sins. But these aren’t words that usually mean contrite. They mean “crushed” and “afflicted.” They are the words you use to describe people who have gone through tough experiences. They are words Job uses to describe the crushing experience of his suffering, words the Psalms use to describe distress and hurt. The word for being struck down comes only once more in the Old Testament, to describe Mephibosheth, who was disabled. Most people who are suffering or afflicted or disabled in spirit don’t need to be contrite, as if it was their fault. While God is indeed close to the contrite, that’s not this prophet’s point. It’s that God is close to the suffering, the afflicted, the distressed, the people who are disabled in spirit.

And such are some of you, maybe many of you. Many of you come to seminary because you are disabled in spirit, and perhaps you find healing, but perhaps you don’t. Some of you come to seminary strong, but now for one reason or another you feel disabled in spirit. God’s word to you as you leave seminary, when you may be less sure than when you came that you have a ministry to exercise, God’s word is not merely that God is inside you or that God is your buddy or that you can do things for God, but that God is *with* the disabled in spirit, the low in spirit, the crushed, the afflicted.

And God is with the people who tremble at his word. If there’s anywhere in this prophet’s statement where it implies something like being contrite, then this is where it does so, and so it certainly issues a challenge to us. We’re not especially inclined to tremble at God’s words. We’re more likely to question them. And that’s okay, though trembling needs to come in sometime. Maybe it’s a way of describing the last stage in the journey from being pre-critical to critical to post-critical. When we discover that God’s words are designed to turn our thinking inside out or make us live in a new way, we may well tremble, and it will be good that we do if it means we’ll shape our thinking and our lives by them. God is near people who tremble at his word.

But maybe the context suggests another implication in that phrase. If you are broken in spirit, that brokenness in itself makes God’s words hard to believe. That’s especially the case when God’s words promise God is going to restore you and do great things for you, which is what many of God’s words in this last section of Isaiah are doing. If somebody promises something when you are down, it’s hard to believe their promise. The very idea of things improving scares you, because it’s hard to believe. Then you may well tremble at God’s word, because it’s too good to believe. And if you do tremble, then that’s okay, because God is near people who are so crushed in spirit that they tremble at the promises God gives them. God doesn’t say, “Sorry you tremble at my promises, I won’t be able to fulfill them, then.” God says, “Sorry you tremble at my promises, I’d better fulfill them, then.”

There’s one more note in these declarations about God that struck me as significant when I was asked to preach today. First, the prophecy has declared that God is high and holy, with the heavens as his throne. Second, God is near the person who is broken and trembling. But then third, God asks a question. “Wherever is the house you could build for me?” Now elsewhere, Isaiah 56-66 is quite enthusiastic about the idea of the people building a house for God. Indeed, the prophecies describe the temple as a prayer house for all the peoples of the world; Jesus picks up and affirms that description. So it’s not very likely that the prophet is questioning the whole idea of building a house for God. But the prophecy does imply that there’s a certain amount of incoherence about that idea. Other passages in the Old Testament do the same. After all, if the cosmos as a whole is God’s throne and the earth is God’s footstool, wherever on earth could you put God’s house? Duh! Furthermore, if God is with the people who are spiritually broken, how does it make sense to have a building for God to live in?

Build it and he will come. Yes, that works. God never wanted to have a house to live in, but David was keen on the idea, so God shrugged his shoulders and came. Here, then, God points to the oddness of the plan to rebuild the house. Will they never learn? But God will shrug his shoulders and come.

Seminary has taught you to build. It has taught you to do things for God, to aim to make a difference – ah, that sacred American aim and phrase. It has taught you to partner with God. It has colluded with all your American instincts. You can build, and God will come. But God pointed out to David that David was reversing the way the relationship between God and us was supposed to work. “Actually, I’m the one who builds the house,” God said, “in a different sense from the one you have in mind.” We hate the idea that the coming of the kingdom of God depends on God. We want to be the people who build it, who further it, who encourage it. It’s the American way. And God will shrug his shoulders and cooperate. But God will still be thinking, “Wherever is the house you want to build for me? I am the high and towering one, the one who dwells forever. I dwell on high and holy. The heavens are my throne, the earth is my footstool. But toward this person I look, to the crushed and low in spirit, the one who is afflicted, struck down in spirit, trembling at my word.”