

# **Ordinary Gestures: Extraordinary Witness, Or How to Make a Difference in Your Day**

**A sermon by Abena P.A. Busia  
Presented on Sunday, October 17, 2010**

## **Sermon Prayer:**

Good morning church. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

## **Sermon:**

I begin my sermon with the Old Testament reading for the day from the book of the prophet Isaiah chapter 6, the first eight verses. (Isaiah 6:1-8.)

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above it stood the seraphim. Each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he did fly. 3 And one cried unto another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory!"

4 And the post of the door moved at the voice of him that cried and the house was filled with smoke. 5 Then said I: "Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

6 Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand which he had taken with the tongs of the altar. 7 And he laid it upon my mouth and said: "Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged."

8 Also I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then said I, "Here am I! Send me."

Those are surely some of the most famous of ecstatic visions we have in the holy Gospel. Now I confess when I first thought of the title of my sermon it was originally going to be "Ordinary People, Extraordinary Witness." But I didn't think I would have much credibility beginning a sermon about ordinary people with the words of the prophet

Isaiah. But also, on reflection, I realized I didn't want to talk about the people so much as what those people did in today's gospel and Old Testament reading.

Beginning with Isaiah though perhaps because I am a poet, I am always struck by the progress that that reading takes us through: We are given the prophetic vision in the first four verses. But what matters in particular for me today are the last four verses, verses 5-8, which cover the response of Isaiah and the resolution that propels towards mission. After the poetic vision what comes first is that extraordinary declaration about "unclean lips". One of the great Prophets, whose poetry is evident even in translation, declares himself to be a man of unclean lips: the first response to the vision is a profound self-recognition which leads to a confession that otherwise we would not know. But how does a man of unclean lips become the great prophet that we know him to be? The answer to that lies in what happens next. Those lips are touched with the purging fire of coal. Fire in a sense purifies and burns away the sin that made the prophet say, "I am a man of unclean lips." Only then he is ready to go, and can proclaim without hesitation, "Here am I, send me."

At the other extreme is the woman at the well from today's gospel whose name we don't even know. Now just as most of us have the humility to realize we are not the prophet Isaiah, most of us also don't want to be looked upon like the woman at the well, an outcast even amongst the outcasts, which is what the Samaritans were to the Jews. There is much speculation that in a culture where getting water was a collective female activity of early morning or early evening (and we have a wonderful illustration of that if you think of the story of Rebecca, for example. Rebecca at the well when Abraham's servant comes to look for a bride for his son.) This woman was alone at the well at mid-day, probably because of her social standing. And people even in our permissive day look sideways at someone who has had five husbands, and then has still ended up with another man who is not her husband. Be that as it may, that is the very person that that peculiar and troubling young Jewish rabbi from Nazareth decides he is going to commune with, again in a culture where rabbis don't speak to women in public, let alone a Samaritan woman of dubious social standing even in her own world.

But why do we know this unnamed woman, why is her story relevant to us. Again, we must look at the process of the story; the simple encounter leads to self-revelation and confession again, "I have no husband", with all that that means. But then consider what happens, she says immediately, "I see you are a prophet", not only does she do that,

she leaves her water pot which after all was the purpose of her trip, and runs to tell everybody, "Come and see, I met this man who could tell me all about myself, I think I've seen the Messiah". She didn't have to be sent, she was inspired to go and tell everyone and share the experience that she had just had, and they did go. We know her story because indeed she is the first evangelist.

But what has this to do with us, particularly on laity Sunday, a day on which we are here to focus on those of us, ordinary mortals, not prophets and probably not social outcasts, and the nature of our service and witness. What is it then that this unnamed woman and the prophet Isaiah, the two extremes of the social ladder, have in common? They are both witnesses to the glory of God. And how do we know this? Because they both in fact did the same thing, and it is that simple gesture that is required of all of us: they looked into the face of God, and acknowledged to Him that He had seen them, and seen them aright.

Now few of us ever have dramatic encounters with God. You know St. Paul on the road to Damascus lives with all of us, but what St. Paul and the prophet Isaiah, and I mention St Paul because he is the author of this morning's Epistle; St. Paul and the prophet Isaiah, and the simple un-named woman at the well have in common is that gesture of acknowledging the utterly transforming presence of God. It is that which empowers and inspires them to go out and share the knowledge that that encounter brings. The simple gesture is that first gesture of inward acknowledgement that they have seen the Lord. I said simple, I did not say easy.

Now, all of us I think have had a similar moment that empowers us to serve in our different ways. And though we do know people who can speak of dramatic conversion experiences, for most of us that isn't the way it goes. Most of us live with a growing slow recognition of growing up in church, being part of the Sunday school, and coming in life's journey to realize that we need to think more carefully about what that training means and take it on aboard for ourselves. For many of us it is the example of others in our lives who stood by us at particular moments and shared their faith or who observing their daily walk in life transformed us and gave us to an inner witness. Sometimes we don't even realize what specific moment that it was until many years later.

In my own case for instance, I can tell a story of how in retrospect I realized my moment of the conviction of God. I'm a little girl; I'm 7 years-old; we are in Holland. And when we arrived in Holland my brothers and sisters and I couldn't get into the British school,

which was the natural place my parents looked, because it was full. So we enrolled in the American school because you know we had to find an English speaking school. And mother used to take us to school the way she knew. And a few weeks after we started we started carpooling with an American family - I believe they were a military family. And the first day they took us to school I was completely lost; the father was driving and he went a radically different way. I had no idea once we turned off of our street where we were.

Until we got to a particular place and suddenly he approached a familiar junction from a different direction and turned left where my mother usually turned right. But once he made that turn I knew where we were; there was a spectacularly beautiful avenue of Dutch elm trees that led up to another T-junction.

And I was so excited recognizing where we were that I said, "Oh, I know where we are now! We're going to go straight and there'll be a junction and when you get to that junction we turn right to go to church and left to go to school. But today's a school day so we are going to turn left. Where do you go to church?" I was just making conversation. There was a silence in the car and then the father said. "We don't go to church." That was not an answer that surprised me. I knew this was a world full of people who had different faiths. So I said, "Why not?", expecting we're Jewish or Muslim or something.

And then he said - and I have to say at that time I was looking out of the window at the trees. I was being polite, I wasn't really interested in the conversation but I felt having opened my mouth I should make conversation. But it was early morning, it was just before 8 o'clock in the morning and it was a sort of this time of year - a fall morning. And there was a beautiful, beautiful early morning light shining on the tops of these elm trees. And because I was down looking up, you could see the dark green from above but they were illuminated light from above and the sun kept disappearing as we moved past the trees and reappearing between the trees. And that's what I'm looking at when the father's voice said, "We don't believe in God." And I remember my little 7 year-old mind thinking "Now that is just about as silly as saying we don't believe in green." I didn't say that, I was too polite and one didn't talk back to grown-ups who said silly things. But I remember that moment very, very vividly - the total incomprehensibility of what had been said in that moment of the gentle spectacular beauty of where we were passing through. Only in retrospect did I realize that that was the moment that I knew

for certain there was a God, no matter what any grown up I couldn't talk back to was saying to me, and he was a God of sunlight on green trees.

However that moment appears to us, we have all of us in fact had that moment when we know the presence of the Divine, and we know we are in the presence of the Divine and it makes us at one and the same time humble...I am a man of unclean lips... I have no husband...; and bold.. "Here am I, send me!"...come, go and see that rabbi. It is this mystery and the power to make us bold in the conviction of Christ that St Paul prays for - for all believers in today's epistle; the God of the human heart who secures us in the love of God. That is the turning point, what we read today; is the turning point of a letter which takes us from the understanding of the role of the church and our place in it, to the implications of our place in it; the implications of a life of the holy spirit that will lead to the Church triumphant.

But we get there through the simple gesture of the confession of the love of God and its transforming power, once we acknowledge that, then our lives however simple are a witness to his divine plan, and our ordinary lives are transformed and transformative. In fact, the point of such visions and affirmations is our ordinary lives; or, as Oswald Chambers, the writer of *My Utmost for His Highest*, puts it in one of the passages he had for last week, "We have to learn to live in reliance upon what we saw in the vision, and not simply live in ecstatic delight and conscious reflection upon God." Relies on what we saw, not simply live in ecstatic delight and conscious reflection. And "conscious" is the key here; for as people of Christ walking the earth, our intimacy with Him is to be so unconscious we do his Will without consciousness of sanctity and striving. Cause when that happens it makes us holy humbugs. There was no meditation behind Isaiah's immediate response, or the woman's impetuous haste to share the good news. We must never forget that her story is known because she's the first Evangelist, the first "lay person" outside the inner circle of Christ to broadcast that the Messiah lives and walks amongst us.

The record of the encounter between the woman and the Lord is extraordinary, and shows Christ as a teacher who can take the circumstances under which they meet, by a historic well of water which, however sweet needs to be returned to constantly, to a metaphorical understanding of who He is, the water that cleanses and satisfies eternally. By soaking in this water we are empowered by a Lord who dwells in our hearts through

Faith, a Faith that as both these stories show, and St. Paul prays for us, is grounded in the kind of Love that brings knowledge.

But then what? What then is our mission as lay people? We are not as Carl Wilson taught the children – the professionals. What are the details of the nature of our service? And we must answer that in our own hearts with our own lives. What I want us to reflect on today, is not only what has the Lord empowered me to do, but also how has the Lord empowered me to be. The theme for today, that we share as a congregation of United Methodists is "One in Spirit, All in Ministry: In the Spirit of Stewardship." And stewardship takes many forms, both in terms of ministering to a home community, as well as ministering to strangers, and ministering to those not of one's faith community at all. And a personal conviction of the presence of God is not enough, it is not all we are called to do.

We are called to spread the Word, literally through the Good News of the Gospel, and also through the testimony of our very lives. The Word of God and the Love of Christ is shed abroad through us, in everything we do. All of us workers for God must recognize that we live amongst the skeptics, as did all of those who are witnesses to faith from the prophet Isaiah to the woman at the well to everybody else since. Isaiah for example if we remember was being ignored by his own people, but let us not forget that it was said even of Jesus of Nazareth, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Nevertheless, we are not to act based on our pasts of unclean lips and irregular relationships or whatever our personal confession may be. And we're not called to act out of a present beset with cynicism or the fanatics or the skeptics; we're called to act out of an eternally present and constant joy that leads others to the Lord, so that may be said of us as was said of the woman at the well after her ordinary gesture, "And many of the Samaritans of the city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified", "He told me all that I ever did" and more importantly because of what they said to her, "now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world, that is extraordinary witness that made a difference in her day, as it will continue to do in ours, in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.