



May 30, 2021, Trinity Sunday

Psalm 29

Isaiah 6:1-8

The Woe We Know
The Reverend Melissa Anne Rogers

I have to admit something to you. I never hear the lamenting cry of Isaiah in his dire state of woe — without thinking of Buck Owens. I’m going to blame my father for this.

Well, and also a terrible 1970’s silly sketch show called *Hee-Haw*. Do you know it? Against the fictional backdrop of Kornfield County, a comedy troupe performed skits. Critics called it ghastly, *Hee-Haw* hasn’t aged well in the light of history and our sensitivity to divisive cultural stereotypes. Amongst the unencumbered southern folk of *Hee-Haw*, the carefree, “country bumpkin” was a cornerstone character. I couldn’t stand *Hee-Haw*. But my father, a bit of a stereotypical country bumpkin himself, loved it. Many of my childhood mornings he burst into my room belting out their songs to get me out of bed. He especially loved the quartet of country singers in overalls, holding jugs of moonshine, with a hound dog, singing about their troubles. They delivered the lyrics with a thick Southern Accent — singing: “Gloom, despair, and agony on me, deep dark depression, excessive misery. If it weren’t for bad luck, I’d have no luck at all, Gloom Despair and Agony on me.” With each line of the refrain, one of the guys would cry “Woe...” It was that woe repeated again and again that is burned on my brain. Portly white men singing a song about hitting bottom, feeling bad about their life’s predicament, grateful they were in it together. They were poking fun at a very human feeling — woe.

We all have times when we feel bad ourselves, even when we feel worthless. We’ve felt lost. We’ve had despairing days, internalized gloom. Everyone has had a “woe is me” moment, or a “woe is me” season in life — when the source of our suffering is ourselves. It’s one of life’s great lessons, that sometimes we bear the pain we’ve brought upon ourselves. It can be hard to recover from that. If we can talk about our pain, share it with our friends, and even manage to make light of it, or laugh at ourselves, perhaps we can get beyond it, or through it. *Hee-Haw* tried to turn feelings of woe and unworthiness into comedy; of being lost, funny.

But no matter the spin entertainment puts on woe, no matter that humorist David Sedaris can make worthlessness ironic, or author Anne Lamott can make pain poignant — feeling bad about yourself and what you’ve done to make your own life harder is a real problem. For too many, “woe is me” is at the heart of chronic depression, spiritual malaise and emptiness, more poor choices, and suicidal thoughts. For so many young people, “woe is me,” is not a moment but a way of being, leading to self-harming behaviors like cutting, eating disorders, anxiety. Michel de Montaigne wrote that “Of all our infirmities, the most savage is to despise our being.” So many people seem to excel at this self-inflicted, self-centered woe.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation. Copyright ©2019. All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

Negative self-talk has spawned a whole counseling culture that includes self-affirmation exercises, medications, CBT, and support groups. Peleton classes with spin instructors telling you that *you are better than you know* are all the rage. We explore why we are so self-wounding — who or what helped us to be that way — to reprogram our thinking. What can silence the thoughts that we aren't good enough, that we're cursed, that we don't measure up, that we just can't do anything right, that we'll never be free of this temptation or that addiction, that we'll never be without the burden, the fall-out, the outcome of a horrible divorce, or the death of a child, or a choice we made that led to hardship for someone else? What shields us from feeling stigmatized? For those who experience this woe, the unworthiness of Isaiah is not just in one chapter and verse of their life's story, but the whole of their lives. It's no comedy, but tragedy.

Feelings of worthlessness, or being lost, of shame — those aren't limited to individuals. Think of a family who never feels accepted in a community because of the color of their skin or their religion, or something that has happened to them. Remember those churches where abuse has been swept under the rug by leaders or pastors. All the members feel a part, feel stained by it. Whole cities feel the “woeness”, the “lostness”, when sin is uncovered. Tomorrow is the centennial of the Tulsa Race Massacre. Even among native Tulsans, so many never knew of the most deadly and destructive racist attack in U.S. history in their community. Finally, the spotlight is there, the horror of what happened, the shame of a story buried for a century, along with bodies just now being unearthed, and a vibrant black culture destroyed. Bringing to light what has been in the dark brings, for some, feelings of woe. The people of Tulsa, in this moment of racial reckoning, are facing a “woe is me” moment. Our own First Pres Member and Tulsa Native, author Scott Ellsworth, has been at the forefront of work to bring this tragedy into the public's view, a crucial addition to our discussions about systemic racism and white supremacy. Tulsa's woe awakens us to our own in this world of racial injustice and violence. “Woe is me... for I am a many of unclean lips,” Isaiah cried, and his song reverberates and resonates across the centuries, even into our present situation, onto our political landscape, voiced over the dangerous chatter of those who deny science, minimize deep injustice in our world, and ignore climate change at the peril of all the people. At so many levels, woe is real.

What are we to do with our woe, our sense of unworthiness? Well, we can come to church to overcome it. Can't we?

Years ago, a visitor became a regular attender. A dabbler in more meditative religions, she was drawn here by our music program. I invited her to join. “I just can't. It's that prayer of confession — every week! Why do we have to come to church and beat ourselves up Sunday after Sunday? I do that enough on my own — I don't need worship to do that for me.” Worship was worsening her woe, which is not the point of our liturgy at all! We are all human, and we admit our shortcomings before God, here, where “bad” is not the final word, but a necessary, honest word. We once were lost, but now are found. Because we are human, a sense of “lostness” clings to us even as the forgiven and even reminded every day is a clean start. Somehow, sadly, she missed that. But that question — if we are made in God's image, isn't there inherent goodness in us? Should not our encounters with the Divine be affirming and our worship a pathway to greater self-esteem?

I learned that she was raised in a Christian tradition that seemed happy to emphasize our badness. Some think believing is about beating our breasts to appease a disappointed Creator. And for some, God is nothing more than Molly Maid, looking for all the stains to blot out. Church is not a place they love, but a place they owe. The Heard John Calvin say “We have nothing to claim as our own but our sin.” And they arrive with that and never leave with anything else. How tragic! We are beloved, made by God, who made everything good, including us. We were made in God's image, even when we

fail to live up to that image, and when grasped in the holy healing hands of Christ, we are made new, and sustained by the Spirit. That is the Trinitarian nature of our faith, the same faith which carries this great prophet through the most significant moment of his life — confronting himself in the presence of God, and being moved to give his whole life over to God.

Which leads me back to Isaiah and his comedy-free woe.

For five chapters, Isaiah preaches a stinging word of God to Judah, condemning her political arrogance, spiritual pride, and economic injustice, indicting their 52 years of loyalty to King Uzziah, one who brought them prosperity, military power, and political influence. Uzziah put himself in the place of God, and they ignored it. His pride and arrogance met God’s justice, his death tumultuous, disorienting, dislocating to the people. All of which prompts in chapter 6 a likely renewal of Isaiah’s call, a re-commissioning to serve in this crucial moment. Isaiah finds himself in the presence of God in an intimate experience of the “Holy of Holies.” Completely exposed, completely known, Isaiah cannot avoid his total inadequacy, his absolute unworthiness. Yet, his song of woe, of gloom, despair and agony, are no match for the song of heaven. His earth-bound badness will never drown out the song of the seraphs: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.” Our badness has never drowned it out, either. Hear in this passage the oldest known liturgy we use in the church today — you’ll sing it next week from this table. Listen to God’s goodness drowning out our badness, making us worthy to come and receive the sacred nourishment of Christ. Holy God, Holy Jesus, Holy Spirit. God in three, three in One, God united to welcome us, to forgive us, to cleanse us, to call us. That Latin word for holy is *sanctus*, and when we sing this word, even three times, what divides us from one another and from God crumbles away. Divisions are transcended. These words brought Isaiah together with God. These words bring us together with one another and with God.

The seraph brings a live coal from the altar to touch and burn Isaiah’s lips, searing his sin away. Through his confession of his brokenness and this act of cleansing, he is purified. Woe may return to him, but it no longer defines him.

The woe we know, thanks to the surpassing compassion of our triune God, never need be a state of being. Isaiah has a searing memory of being made whole by God. Our hot coal is the pain and joy of understanding Jesus’ life and death to set us free from our “woeness”. Were our hearts not burning within us,” the disciples asked on the road to Emmaus?

Like Isaiah, our confession of our unworthiness each Sunday reminds us that woe is not a way to be, but a place we visit. For God loves us enough to create us, believes in us enough to save us, and needs us enough to call us. “Here I am – all that I am — send me.” Isaiah’s story is our story — moved out of woe to be on the way to being of use to God.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes, “Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant,

as wanted. The whole story of creation, incarnation and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tell us that God desires us."

God wants us. That is the answer to our woe. You are wanted. Called. Commissioned. We are not people of badness, we are people of goodness and grace. We will never choose gloom, despair and agony over faith, hope, and love. We are families and communities, and cities, and a nation able to reckon with the past and face the present because the future is about hope. We want the God who wants us. We may do bad things, but God's holy song, when you listen, will keep calling you away from woe and shame towards a life worthy of your calling.

© 2021 **Melissa Anne Rogers**