

Our Scriptures today teach us an interesting and vitally important dynamic at the heart of our life with God. Both Isaiah and Peter, we are told, experienced this: an encounter with God in God's full glory. For Isaiah it was a vision of the Lord, whose robe filled the entire temple, surrounded by giant six winged seraphs. For Peter, it was Jesus' command to cast out into the deep, and the excessive catch that resulted. So, first, each had an experience of God's glory.

Next, each one experienced his own humanity. "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man," says Peter. Isaiah says, "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." In the face of God's fullness, a human will feel very, well, human; dare I say small, but in a frighteningly beautiful way.

Something about this encounter is cleansing, which we see most strikingly with Isaiah. His unclean lips are literally burned clean.

Next, they are sent. Having experienced fully that they are definitively not God, they are ready for service. "From now on," Jesus tells Peter, "you will be catching people". Now that you have seen. Now that you have seen who I am and who you are, now we can move forward.

Service with God – doing God's work – assumes something that is very easy to forget: the work is God's; we are merely cooperating. The work, no matter how good we are at it, is simply not our own.

All of this has boiled to the surface in recent days as I've watched coverage of the Christian missionaries from Idaho who went to Haiti to rescue orphans and ended up in prison on charges of child trafficking.

Since the story broke over a week ago, the coverage has shifted. Initially, the story focused on the misfortune of innocent do-gooders, with everyone expecting they would be released quickly, all charges dropped, laughing at the terrible misunderstanding.

Then it seemed the reporters were finding some satisfaction in the prolonged detention of the 10 members of this church group, casting them as blustering idiots who had no idea what these children actually needed because they were too busy feeling self-righteous about their good intentions.\*

Now, news reports have grown more serious, as there appears to be evidence that the group leader actively deceived Haitian parents about why she wanted to take these children to the Dominican Republic.

As of yet, nobody knows what happened, who knew what, or what her true purposes were. Why did she urgently fly down there? Why did she enlist the help of others? What did she want for the children she was transporting? These are important questions, but nobody as yet knows the answer to them. It may be what makes the story so intriguing for the media and all of us who watch it: when another's intentions are not known, it is very tempting (perhaps even entertaining) to try to name them ourselves. One CNN reporter gave a report that heavily suggested she was planning on taking the kids to her home in the US because she always dreamed of having an orphanage filled with children from around the world.

In light of today's readings, however, I think these reports are missing a far more interesting story, and that is this: we may not learn her true purposes because she herself may not have known them. I don't mean she hadn't planned that far in advance, I mean she may have been deceiving others because all along, she was deceiving herself.

Jesuit Anthony de Mello wrote, “History’s worst atrocities were carried out in good faith.” Religious rhetoric can function as the world’s most dangerous blindfold. Convinced one’s errand is God’s errand, people can launch genocides, burn crucifixes on lawns, bring down airplanes, and detonate backpacks full of bombs while they themselves are wearing them.

I spent some time in Sarajevo last year, the site of a terrible genocide just twenty years ago. The mostly Orthodox Christian Serbs attacked the Bosnian Muslims for a number of complex reasons that boil down to politics, power, and resources, but the genocide was fueled by religious rhetoric. The Serbs symbol of triumph – the Cross – still stands menacingly on a Bosnian hill.

It seems our readings speak to the human tendency to **reverse the divine order of things**: often, we enlist God in the work our **ego** naturally sends us on. Consistently, however, in these scripture passages and many others, the prophet or disciple responds to their encounter with God with a deep and transformative awareness of all that they are not. And somehow, this deep humility is cleansing. Only now, in humility, are they ready to go where God is calling them.

It is human nature to want to hide our flaws – our sinfulness – from others, and from ourselves. We may even think we can successfully hide it from God. It was once said, “What you try to hide from God you only succeed in hiding from yourself.” There is something liberating about being shown our sinfulness; perhaps because we can rest easy, no longer laboring to conceal it. And perhaps because it lays to rest the fear that if God were to see it, we would not be loved. Jesus sees who Peter really is, and that changes nothing of his love for him.

The human heart can be a pretty wild place. Our motives are frequently less than holy. When we are unshakeable in our convictions, sometimes we are furthest from what is actually true. But knowing we are often wrong, that we are human and *not* God – this is the place true discipleship begins.

Isaiah’s message was not about to make him popular. And Peter would leave behind a profession to begin a journey where he would constantly hit up against his own limits. These lives were clearly not in service to their own egos, because they had encountered God, and in so doing, they encountered themselves. They no longer tried to hide from themselves.

These readings are advising us that the **first step in a journey of service** is not to pack a bag and buy a plane ticket. The first step is to ask for the courage to look inward, with God’s help. Service does not begin with heroism. It begins with humility.