

# HOLY MYSTERY

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

June 7, 2009

8:30 and 11:05 a.m. services

*(Trinity Sunday)*



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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## Lectionary Texts:

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; and John 3:1-17

## Isaiah 6:1-8

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

*<sup>4</sup>The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.*

*<sup>5</sup>And I said: “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!”*

*<sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. <sup>7</sup>The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”*

*<sup>8</sup>Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”  
And I said, “Here am I; send me!”*

John Wesley, the founder of what is now the United Methodist Church, was born in June 1703 in Epworth, England. Wesley was the 14<sup>th</sup> of 17 children born to Susanna and Samuel Wesley. His father was a priest in the Church of England. When John was five years old, he almost burned to death because people who disagreed with some of the things his father had said from the pulpit set the parsonage on fire. My, my. Imagine that. People took seriously what you said from the pulpit in those days. In spite of that and other experiences, John Wesley, like his father before him, became a priest in the Church of England. His brother Charles also found his way into the Anglican priesthood. Together, they became a dynamic force for spiritual renewal and revival throughout England. John was the preacher and theologian,

and Charles was the musician and hymn writer. Many of Charles Wesley's hymns are preserved in our United Methodist hymnal. I am keenly aware that every time I step into the pulpit here, the stained glass likenesses of John and Charles Wesley are keeping an eye on me and all of us. There are so many aspects about the life of John Wesley that I could share today. I want to tell you about one of his failures rather than one of his many successes. Maybe it is a failure that you and I will connect with him more.

In 1735, John Wesley left England to come to America to do evangelism work amongst the Indians and bring a little spirituality to the colonists. For 22 months, he was the pastor of the Anglican church in Savannah, Georgia. Unfortunately, neither the Indians nor the colonists were very interested in what the brash young Wesley had to say. But the most interesting turn of events had to do with what happened in Wesley's love life. Ah, I just got your attention again. Wesley fell in love with a young woman named Sophia Hopkey. The relationship progressed to the point that everyone assumed they would get married. For whatever reason, Wesley called it off, and Sophia was so upset that she ran off and married someone else, rather quickly. To kind of add insult to injury, Sophia and her new husband came to church together the next Sunday at the Anglican church in Savannah. Wesley was so upset that when they came forward to receive communion, he refused to serve them. Sophia's father was so upset by that action that he filed charges against Wesley. That's right. There was no separation of church and state in that day and time, and what Wesley did was taken before the civil authorities. So on a rainy night in Georgia in 1737, John Wesley fled Georgia and went back to England never to return to America again.

Within a year, John Wesley had a heartwarming experience at a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London and went on to become perhaps the most dynamic spiritual force England has ever known. The renewal movement that he started after the unexpected and challenging events in Georgia became the 10-million member Methodist Church with a world-wide constituency and ministry.

You and I are here together today because a man named John Wesley overcame some unexpected events in his life and continued his life and ministry. It is

those unexpected twists and turns in our lives that gives us an opportunity for the presence of a holy mystery to take us to a place of grace.

It is often when we are very vulnerable and aware of our own failures that we are open to God's call in our lives. We read two wonderful stories in our scripture lessons about two persons in just such circumstances. I wonder what Isaiah was thinking when he wandered into the temple that day so long ago or what might have been on Nicodemus's mind when he came to Jesus at night. Offer a little sacrifice, say a little prayer, and I'm on my way. Let's see what this Jesus is all about. But for Isaiah on that day in the temple long ago, something unexpected happened as Nicodemus had his life turned upside down. And Isaiah experienced the very presence of God.

His first response was that of unworthiness. "Woe is me," he said. "For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live amongst a people of unclean lips."

Could it not be the response of all of us in the presence of the sacred? In Isaiah's vision, one of the heavenly creatures touched his lips with a hot coal to burn them clean from all guilt.

And then he heard the voice, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?"

And before Isaiah really had time to process it all, he found himself saying, "Here am I; send me."

Something unexpected had happened in his life.

Isaiah's calling was to be a prophet. Prophets are the ones who hold religious bodies and civil authorities accountable with messages of truth and grace, justice and righteousness. Prophets are the ones who call people to do the right thing no matter what may be popular or expedient. Prophets are not always popular and are often killed in one way or another. So for Isaiah to say "Hey, I'll do that" was to give the very best of himself to the call of God in his life whatever the cost. Life is about what you do after something unexpected happens in your life.

John Wesley was basically run out of Georgia after he made some rather dumb decisions, but he went on to give his life to something that made a difference in the lives of countless millions of people.

Isaiah gave his life to something that had its dangers and challenges, but it was the right thing to do.

OK. You're not John Wesley, and you are not Isaiah.

But at some level something unexpected has happened in your life, and life is about what you do with your life after something unexpected has happened. In those moments of unworthiness or guilt or fear or misfortune or vulnerability, the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, Triune God comes as a holy mystery with grace to burn your lips clean or warm your heart or allow you to be born from above and gives you the opportunity to give yourself in God's service at whatever level. No life is more significant than the one who has said, "whatever I am Lord; I give myself in your service. Here am I; send me."

There are lots of ways to give yourself in God's service.

Perhaps where you work, you are the one who says, whatever the cost, I will do the right thing. Honesty and integrity will be the way we do business.

Or maybe you teach a child in Sunday School or sing in the choir, or pray for someone in need.

The call of God comes to each of us in different ways. But we are all given the opportunity to say, "Here am I; send me."

On this Trinity Sunday, we are reminded that God is a Holy Mystery who calls all of us in our weakness and vulnerability to give ourselves in service to something larger than self, beyond yourself in service to Christ and humanity.