



**“Holy Cow!”**

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring  
Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California***

***Sunday, June 7, 2009***

***Isaiah 6:1–8 (NRSV)***

## **ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE**

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

The Old Testament reading for today and the primary text for my sermon is from Isaiah, chapter 6, verses 1–8, which is a pericope often referred to as “The Call of Isaiah.”

In this passage, God is imagined as a divine king and the prophet as a subject summoned to the royal throne room to get his marching orders.

God is described as so immense in this scene, and the prophet as so small, that Isaiah is only able to see the hem of God’s garments. This difference in proportions further accentuates the prophet’s sense of the awesomeness of God.

As the prophet approaches the throne, seraphs sing songs to set the stage for today’s drama and to entertain the Lord. Seraphs were six-winged wonders known only to the prophet’s imagination, and depicted later in Gothic gargoyles, and much later in Hollywood fantasy films.

Imagine the royal throne room, six-winged seraphs, and an audience with the Almighty.

Isaiah, by his own description, was truly awed, and he was quick to humble himself before God. He tried to explain to God that he was “a man of unclean lips,” and was associated with “a nation of people with unclean lips,” which was the prophet’s way of saying that he was “a sinner,” and a person who hailed from a sinful nation, and that he was unfit for an audience with the divine.

Despite the prophet’s protestations, God did not dismiss him on his perceived merits. Instead, God summoned one of the seraphs, who grabbed a hot coal from the temple fire, and swooped down and seared the prophet’s lips with the coal, and cleansed him from his sin.

While Isaiah was recovering from his absolution, the prophet overheard God asking his retinue, “Who will go for us?” And Isaiah stepped forward, and said, “Here am I Lord, send me.”

As we prepare to hear again the call of the ancient prophet, Isaiah, let us sing together the song of the six-winged seraphs, “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

**MUSICAL MEDITATION**

“Holy, Holy, Holy” (v. 1)

**No 277**

*Ho-ly, ho-ly, ho-ly! God the Al-might-y!  
Ear-ly in the morn-ing we praise your maj-es-ty.  
Ho-ly, ho-ly ho-ly! Mer-ci-ful and might-y!  
God in three per-sons, bless-ed Trin-i-ty!*

**SCRIPTURE READING**

Isaiah 6:1–8

Lisa Pemberton

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. 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. And one called to another and said:

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

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 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!’

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 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.’ 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!’

**SERMON**

“Holy Cow!”

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

We have a saying back home in Iowa for those occasions when words may fail us—those occasions that are filled with surprise, overwhelm, and awe. The phrase is one that even city people know. The phrase is, “Holy cow!”

My sister’s oldest niece, Susie, has given us a couple of “Holy cow!” experiences in the last two years. The first one was when she announced her engagement to her husband, Nate, after only a few months of courting.

A more recent “Holy cow!” experience that Susie and Nate have given us is the news that they are expecting their first child—at Christmas time this year, which if the baby’s on time, will be just a few days before my younger niece’s wedding. “Holy cow!” I said, when Susie called us with the news. “Holy cow!”

When Susie called me with the big news about the baby last month, I was transported back to a time about 24 years ago when her mother, Marlene, was only a few months into the first year of marriage and discovered that she was a few weeks pregnant with her daughter, Susie. In both instances, I remember thinking, “Holy cow!”

On the one hand, how shocked could I be? People meet, fall in love, get married, and start families all the time, right? What’s the big deal? Well, it isn’t a big deal, unless, of course, the person getting married or starting the family is you or your child—or someone very dear to you.

I wonder, what have been some of your “Holy cow!” experiences in life? What have been those occasions when whatever happened to you or to someone dear to you had a memorable impact on you? To encourage your train of thought, I’ll offer a couple more of my “Holy cow!” moments.

One of my big “Holy cow!” moments was being called to serve as a pastor at The Old South Church in Boston. Old South is one of the truly great churches in our denomination and nation. It is famous for many things, including the organizational role that Old South’s deacons played in the Boston Tea Party.

Toward the end of the first semester of my senior year in seminary, two people (one a professor and the other an interim pastor with whom I had served) urged me to apply for a pastoral position at Old South. The two were both members of Old South and were well acquainted with the senior minister, the search committee, and the ministry of the church. Independent of each other, I later learned, they called the senior minister and recommended me for the position. I was humbled by their encouragement and the reference calls. I was also, quite frankly, a bit puzzled by the whole situation.

You see, I had never actually been to Old South before interviewing there. I hadn’t even driven into the city much before I graduated from seminary. I was afraid to drive in downtown Boston, because people careen around the streets there like hockey players on an ice skating rink.

I was a country girl who envisioned herself in a country parish—if not back in the Midwest, then at least on the outskirts of a New England town—not in the heart of a big city, and definitely not in Copley Square.

Imagine my surprise when the search committee not only invited me for an interview, but when the senior minister called me back for a second interview, and then a third, and soon after that offered me the job.

One of the first times that I saw the sanctuary at Old South was the day I candidated for the position. I had spent most of the night before that service in the emergency room at a local hospital with a friend, and had gotten up early after very little sleep to “polish” my sermon, which I was pretty sure could never be polished enough for a church that owned communion silver made by Paul Revere.

There I was, the Sunday after Easter, preaching a sermon in one of the most historic churches in the United States, surrounded by a professional choir, a small symphony orchestra, about 500 worshipers, a host of ordained clergy, and college and seminary professors in the congregation.

“Holy Cow!” I remember thinking to myself. Holy Cow!

I don’t remember much about that sermon—thankfully. I suspect that if the service was recorded that day, or if I could find my notes from that sermon, I would be mortified by the reminder of how feeble my words were that day.

They called me anyway. And that was the beginning of a whole series of “Holy cow!” experiences at OSC.

Another “Holy cow!” experience that I had back in those early days in ministry wasn’t as thrilling, but it was equally riveting.

Over the course of the first six months that I was on the pastoral staff at Old South, parishioners and even people off the streets sought me out for pastoral counseling and support. Among the masses were several people who shared with me that they were lesbian or gay. I wasn’t terribly surprised. We were after all only a few blocks from Bay Village, which was a well-known gay neighborhood in Boston.

What did surprise me though was the realization that virtually none of these people knew each other or were “out” to each other, or to any of the other pastors on the staff. (And, of course, back in those days, neither was I.)

So largely out of a deep sense of pastoral concern for these several members who were struggling with their dual identities as lesbian or gay and Christian, and the sense of isolation that many of them experienced as closeted about their faith to their LGBT friends, and closeted about their sexual identity to their church friends, I asked them how the church could help. “How could Old South make a difference for you?” I asked.

The resounding answer I heard was this: “Start a fellowship group for people like us.” And we did. But not without a “Holy cow!” experience.

Old South Church functioned as a benevolent dictatorship. Nothing, nothing, happened at that church without the blessing of Jim Crawford, the senior minister. I knew that if an LGBT Fellowship was going to even make it into the worship announcements that I needed the blessing of the boss.

The thought of this necessary conversation terrified me. I wasn’t sure how to approach the topic, much less what to say. Finally, I screwed up my courage, came out to one of the other ministers on the staff, Marc Walker, and asked him if he would be willing to approach with me about starting an LGBT Fellowship. Marc agreed.

We talked with Jim. Not once. Not twice. But several times. There was a lot of hemming and hawing. Jim had a good heart, but he was old fashioned—neo-Victorian in fact—and more than anything, he hated conflict.

In the course of our conversations one day, shortly after Marc had left to take a church in the Tacoma, Washington, area, I broached the subject yet again with Jim. This time, he paused, and asked me point blank if I were a lesbian.

Not being one inclined to lie, and fearing that the truth would bring a sweeping end to my ministry at Old South and in the parish in general, I said, “Yes, I am, Jim. Yes, I am.”

Much to my surprise, Jim didn’t fire me that day, although he had the authority to do so. Instead, he said, that he “loved me anyway,” which seemed like a back-handed expression of support—which it was—but I knew Jim pretty well by then, and I knew that he was trying. So I assumed the best about him, and I think, he about me. And we moved on. The LGBT group at Old South was founded a few weeks later, and is still going strong today.

Old South’s journey to becoming ONA didn’t start that day in Jim’s office. It started with the several individuals who dared to share their stories with me. It started with their “Holy cow!” experiences.

Old South didn’t become ONA until two years after I had left. There was a lot of resistance along the way. When the news of the congregation’s decision came through to me, I remember thinking, “Holy cow!” It really happened.

As a result of that succession of “Holy cow!” experiences, next Sunday, The Old South Church in Boston, one of the oldest congregations in the United States, will celebrate its fifteenth anniversary of being an Open and Affirming church. And, much to my surprise, they have invited me back to preach at that worship service as they celebrate this significant anniversary in the life of their congregation.

So, I’ve regaled you with a few of my own “Holy cow!” stories. I hope by now you have recalled some of your own. In the midst of those stories, consider how God may have been at work in those experiences, even if you weren’t sure of God’s presence at the time.

Consider how God may have been at work in bringing resolutions to conflicts and challenges that you may have never thought possible before. Recall how you found the courage to do or say things that needed to be said and done—things you may have never imagined before.

If you’re still searching for examples, know that the Bible is resplendent with “Holy cow!” stories. Some notable Old Testament examples follow: the call of Moses through the burning bush; the call of Isaiah in the throne room from today’s reading; the call of

Queen Esther to divert a pogrom against the Jews; and the call of Ruth to be family for her mother-in-law, Naomi, during a period of tremendous loss for both of them.

Remember too some notable New Testament examples of “Holy cow!” callings, such as: the call of John the Baptist in the wilderness; the call of Jesus through his baptism in the Jordan; and the call of Apostle Paul on the Road to Damascus. Remember these and more...

The more is your story, and my story. It’s all our stories—stories from times when God was working out a holy calling in the midst of our “Holy cow!” experiences. Look again, if you will, at your life, and remember those “Holy cow!” experiences. And as you do, I suspect that you too will see the Holy Spirit at work in your life. I suspect that you will discover anew your holy calling in the midst of those “Holy cow!” experiences. Amen.