

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7), Old Testament, Year C

HERE I AM

Isaiah 65:1-9

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7)

Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me;

I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me.

I said, "Here am I, here am I,"

to a nation that did not call on my name.

2 I spread out my hands all the day

to a rebellious people,

who walk in a way that is not good,

following their own devices;

3 a people who provoke me

to my face continually,

sacrificing in gardens

and burning incense upon bricks;

4 who sit in tombs,

and spend the night in secret places;

who eat swine's flesh,

and broth of abominable things is in their vessels;

5 who say, "Keep to yourself,

do not come near me, for I am set apart from you."

These are a smoke in my nostrils,

a fire that burns all the day.

6 Behold, it is written before me:

"I will not keep silent, but I will repay,

yea, I will repay into their bosom

7 their[a] iniquities and their[b] fathers' iniquities together,
says the LORD;

because they burned incense upon the mountains
and reviled me upon the hills,
I will measure into their bosom
payment for their former doings."

8 Thus says the LORD:

"As the wine is found in the cluster,
and they say, 'Do not destroy it,
for there is a blessing in it,'
so I will do for my servants' sake,
and not destroy them all.

9 I will bring forth descendants from Jacob,
and from Judah inheritors of my mountains;
my chosen shall inherit it,
and my servants shall dwell there.

Diagnosis: Be Afraid: "Here I AM!"

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Back to the Old
Ways

The Israelites have been delivered from exile and are back in the old country, so you would think they'd be faithful to Yahweh out of sheer gratitude. But no, they've slipped back to their old ways. (Or at least the majority of them have.) They have become a "rebellious people" who "walk in a way that is not good" (v. 2), who provoke Yahweh "to his face continually," who sacrifice to other gods (vv. 3 & 5), who tell Yahweh to stay away, (v. 5), who "offer incense on the mountains and revile [Yahweh] on the hills" (v. 7). Whew! What an incriminating list.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem: Incredible Chutzpa
What's behind that? Deep down, they "follow their own devices" (v. 2). Their presumptuousness leads them to conclude they are holier than even Yahweh (v. 5)! We of course shake our heads at

such amazing chutzpa, but, but...are we all that different? Don't we too like to play god, measuring ourselves and others so we can secretly conclude we are God's peers? Don't we too trust other gods, such as our portfolios, our families, our country, our own selves? Okay, maybe we aren't that blatant, but don't we love to insist that we are always "right?" Worse, can we even help ourselves? It seems we're wired to behave thusly, as if it's in our DNA.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Getting What We Deserve

Yahweh, the great I AM, responds to this with repugnance: "These are smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all day long" (v. 5). He can't help but react justly, he must give them what they deserve. So, Yahweh comes all right—"Here I AM"—but that arrival is terrifying: "I will measure into their bosom payment for their former doings...I will repay, yea, I will repay into their bosom their iniquities and their fathers' iniquities together" (vv. 6-7).

Prognosis: Be Comforted: "Here I AM!"

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Getting What We Don't Deserve

Isaiah doesn't end with this deadly I AM encounter. He goes on to reveal another encounter in which Yahweh will give idolaters what they don't deserve: Mercy! He will "not destroy them all," but...give them descendants (v. 9). In fact, He will make them new! "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth" (v. 17). Such a complete makeover we now know involved I AM's coming as a human, specifically, as Jesus of Nazareth who, on a cross, absorbed into himself the weight of his own judgment! Yahweh responds to this merciful intercession by raising Jesus from hell, a coup that clinches a "new deal," a different ending for everyone.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Made New on the Inside

Suddenly, through the cross, Yahweh's words—"Here I AM"—are the most comforting, joyous words imaginable. And, they affect a remarkable transformation within hearts, a giant makeover if you will. Made-new hearts begin to function differently, as if their DNA has been completely reconfigured. They quit competing with God and instead trust the merciful God who reveals himself in Jesus, which in turn makes them "operate" differently, i.e., by mercy and forgiveness rather than by recompense and retribution.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): On to New Ways

Re-made individuals echo Yahweh's own words back to him: "Here I am," and add, "send me:" Send me as your microphone and your instrument to care for your creation and your creatures, send me to spread your forgiveness around, send me to uphold justice in your world, send me to tell others about Jesus, send—use—me as you make everything new.