

Deborah Sokolove: Hineni: Here I Am

A Sermon for Seekers Church

Sunday, June 18, the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity

by Deborah Sokolove

Hineni: Here I Am

In today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, Isaiah has a vision of God as a great ruler, high and lofty, so immense that the hem of the divine robe fills the Temple. The angels fly around calling to one another, singing "Holy, holy, holy." Isaiah, understandably, feels unworthy to say anything in the presence of such august company, so one of the angels touches Isaiah's mouth with a live, burning coal in order to purify his "unclean lips." Finally, the Holy One asks whom to send. Who will bring the Divine Word to the people? And Isaiah, burned and healed, answers, "Here I am. Send me."

"Here I am." We have heard those words before. During the discernment process, Jeanne Marcus introduced Seekers to the word "Hineni," which is the Hebrew for "Here I am." It means not just simply existing, but being fully present, expectant, and willing to engage. When Jeanne invited us to say "Hinenu: Here we are," we were called as a community to a new kind of listening to God and to one another, as we tried to understand whether or not to buy the building on Carroll Street. Now, six months later, we find ourselves deep in planning renovations both to the building, and to our corporate life. Already, we have been transformed by the burning coals of the Holy Spirit touching our lips and our hearts, and we find ourselves able to speak aloud words that before we didn't even dare to whisper.

Hineni. Here I am. There are many scriptural memories echoing around that simple word. When God called to Abraham, telling him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, Abraham said, "Hineni. Here I am." In addition, later, when Abraham and Isaac walked together up the mountain, Isaac said, "Father," and Abraham answered in the same way he had answered God, "Hineni Here I am." When God called to Moses out of the burning bush, Moses answered, "Hineni. Here I am." Centuries later, when Samuel was a young boy was sleeping in the Temple, he responded to God's call, saying "Hineni. Here I am." Moreover, when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would have a child, Mary, too, said, "Hineni Here I am, the servant of the One."

The Bible tells us that when we are called, the answer is "Here I am." Nevertheless, the Bible also recounts that what follows may not be easy. Certainly, Abraham's conversation with his son that day on Mount Moriah was not easy. Moses had a long argument with God before he finally accepted the task set before him, and, after wandering around in the desert for 40 years, he died without being allowed to reach the Promised Land. Samuel must have had many regrets about his life of following God's call, especially when Saul, whom he had anointed as king, began to oppress his people. Moreover, it is completely obvious that Mary's life as the mother of Jesus was filled as much with hardship and grief as it was with joy.

Our theme for this season in the weeks immediately following Pentecost is "No One But Us." It seems to me that that is just another way of saying "Here I am." Here we are, here each of us is, too often feeling our unworthiness, as did Isaiah; too often pleading with God, as did Moses, to send somebody else, anybody but me. On the other hand, well, ok, maybe me, but just not now, not when I am so busy, not when there is so much else that I am already committed. This is about where I am right now. Overstretched, over committed, and wondering if I have said "here I am" a few too many times.

Yet the deeper question is, have I said it enough? Have I said

it to the right things? A few weeks ago, Jesse came to me for help with his struggle over whether to cut back some of his commitments in Seekers in order to take advantage of some new opportunities opening up for him in his career as a musician. I confidently reassured him that everyone would understand. I said, "it's ok, our individual timetables don't always coincide with the timetable of the community." I told him that love includes the ability to wish the best for the one we love, and that his gifts as a musician are valued and valuable. I reminded him that simple survival is insufficient for all of us, that we need both bread and roses, sustenance for the spirit as well as fuel for the body.

As I said all these things, though, I was engaged in my own struggle to understand the place of my own sense of call in the context of this community. In Peter's recent remarks in regard to the tension between his need to be helpful and the kind of work he is doing at Communities in Schools, he said "some people give a poor person a fish; others give fishing lessons; and others work to clean up the lake so that there will always be fish available." Sitting here in church, hearing those words, I could only weep, for I could not see how anything that I do fits into those categories. Here, in a congregation that values assistance to and involvement with those who have nothing, that stands for social justice and engagement with the powers and principalities in order to achieve it I run an art gallery and study ancient texts and contemporary patterns of prayer. How, I ask myself, can what I do be described as following the Christ who calls us to heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, feed and clothe the poor? I feel like Isaiah must have felt, standing in that gleaming, jeweled, heavenly Temple, watching in awed silence as radiant beings sing to one another in voices like ringing crystal, in the deeply echoing tones of vibrating gongs. Like Isaiah, I feel myself a creature of unclean lips, overwhelmed at the beauty and holy purpose around me, all too aware of my own limitations.

Yet, Hineni. Here I am. Moreover, God is sending me lately, not to talk, but to listen

For the last several months, I have been doing fieldwork at a church in a suburb of Newark, New Jersey, under the aegis of The Newark Project. The Newark Project is a research organization based at Drew University, and funded by the Ford Foundation, which seeks to document the religious life of Newark. Newark is a city largely written off as drug- and crime-ridden, the epitome of urban decay, and part of the intention of the Newark Project is to counteract that image by documenting positive aspects of its citizens' lives. Karen McCarthy Brown, principal investigator, and Peter Savastano, director of the project, taught a course last semester at Drew in Methods of Urban Research, and hired the eight graduate students who signed up as field researchers, to bring back oral histories and ethnographic reports detailing the real and vibrant religious life of individuals and communities in the city and its environs. Each of us was encouraged to design our own part of the project, and other members of the group are investigating such things as the response of religious communities to environmental issues; the relationship of Newark's Muslim communities to international Islamic society and to the Black Nation of Islam; the intersection of Haitian Voudou and Roman Catholic worship; and the religious practices of urban Native Americans in Newark. My own proposal was to identify a church that was committed to liturgical renewal, and to investigate the relationship between its worship life and the ongoing life of the congregation and individuals in it.

This turns out to be both simpler and more complicated than I ever imagined. It is simpler, because people are very generous with their time and their thoughts. No one has ever refused to be interviewed, and when I arrive with my tape recorder and questions, people tell me extraordinary, moving stories about their life and faith. It is more complicated, because what

people say and really believe about their own faith communities is only part of the truth. More complicated, also, because the farther I get into the project, the more variables I am aware of, and the more I realize how looking at the same event or circumstance from a different perspective can yield a completely different understanding of what is going on.

The church I am studying is a Roman Catholic parish a little over a hundred years old. Started by German and Irish immigrants, a grand, neo-Baroque edifice was completely restored inside and out in time for its Centennial celebration. In fact, I picked it because the restorations included a reorganization of the liturgical space, and I anticipated that I would be able to hear some stories about people's reactions to the changes. As it happens, the interior changes were not as extensive as I at first believed, and they were not (according to any of my informants) particularly contentious. The choirmaster did resign when it became clear that he and the choir would have to sit in full view of the congregation instead of in the loft, but I was given to understand that there were underlying "issues," anyway. In any event, the church was already growing during the renovations, and its rate of growth has increased since they were completed.

Although the church is situated in a largely African-American area, the congregation is mostly white. The names in the register are Italian, Irish, German, and indecipherable. There are a few people of color, both Black and Asian. I have gone to quite a few of the services, on Sundays and weekdays, and have been impressed at how much congregational participation there is – both men and women read scripture and serve as Eucharistic ministers, and the altar servers are both boys and girls. Worship services there are very beautiful, sticking closely to the rubrics, with precisely choreographed movements by celebrant, lectors and everyone else. The vestments and paraments for Lent, Easter and Pentecost have all been

resplendent. The choir is well rehearsed, the cantor intones the Psalm in a full, rich voice and the stately measures of the organ underpin the solemnity of the Mass. As different as it is from Seekers, in certain ways I am beginning to feel at home there.

Recently, however, I realized that I would need to at least take a look at the other two Roman Catholic churches within a mile of the one that is the focus of my work, in order to have a comparative understanding of what I was observing. Both of the others churches were originally missions of the first, one for Italians and the other for African Americans. Over time, each became a parish in its own right, with its own buildings, its own traditions, its own flavor.

Last week, I went to a Mass at the African American church. The church building, set oddly in the middle of an otherwise residential block, is about half the size of the first, and looks like it was built some time in the 1950s or 60s. A brick building with exposed steel trusses in its high, peaked ceiling, it feels comfortably lived-in and welcoming even before the racially mixed congregation arrives. Felt banners with words like "peace" and "charity" adorn the walls, and a felt parament with more words obscures what looks like a very interesting bas-relief on the front of the altar. I arrived early for the 9 o'clock Mass, and as I sat in a back pew, a middle-aged man in wash pants and open-collared short-sleeved shirt began to set things up. As his tasks took him to the back of the church, he greeted each of the few people who were talking animatedly amongst themselves. Seeing me sitting alone, he stopped to chat a little, suggesting that I move forward a row, so that I would be under one of the ceiling fans that provided the only relief from the already muggy morning.

It was only when the entry procession started that I realized this man was not just a friendly "pillar of the community," but rather the deacon, now in vestments appropriate to his

liturgical function. I also realized that I had seen the priest before, also dressed casually as he talked with parishioners before donning the chasuble and stole he would wear as celebrant of the Mass. The procession itself was a little ragged, with both deacon and priest smiling and greeting people by name as they went up the aisle. At the hymns, congregational singing was accompanied by piano and guitar, and a cantor who did not always hit the right pitch. The lectors stumbled once or twice in reading the scripture. In slightly rambling interpolations to the printed liturgy, the priest made the service very specific to **this** congregation, at **this** time and place, rather than a generic Mass that might be found in any Catholic church. In fact, the entire service felt a little more homemade than its Roman Catholic texts and rubrics might lead one to expect.

It was small differences like these that made evident the enthusiasm and genuine sense of community in this parish. At the other church I had been visiting, the passing of the Peace was simple and dignified, handshakes and a murmured "Peace be with you" shared among those immediately next to each other, perhaps a decorous wave in the general direction of a friend sitting across the aisle. At this church, the Peace took an extraordinarily long time, as everyone, including the priest, the deacon, and the musicians, walked up and down the aisle, hugging and greeting everyone else, inquiring after children or absent spouses. At the other church, the Prayers of the People were read from the pulpit, at the end of the other intercessions. At this church, the Prayers of the People were just that: spoken aloud by individual members, from their places in the congregation. At the other church, no one ever greeted me at the end of Mass, unless we had been introduced elsewhere. At this church, at least six people greeted me warmly, noticing that I was a stranger, and asking if I would be coming again. I was beginning to be sorry that I hadn't picked this warm, welcoming, unpretentious church, with its off key singing and bargain-basement vestments, instead of the

visually elegant, musically uplifting, but much more reserved parish that I have been spending so much time in.

However, liturgical style is not everything. As I have interviewed people at the church where I began my study, I have discovered that beneath the cooler exterior, there is also an active community, in which people socialize with one another evenings and on weekends, children play with one another after school, and small groups meet for prayer, study and mutual support. Without exception, people at this parish have described it as warm and welcoming, indeed, as a family. They go to church every Sunday not out of a feeling of obligation, but because it helps them get through the week. They say it encourages them and their children to live better, more ethical, lives, and to be more Christ-like in their dealings with one another, and with the world at large. They support an AIDS ministry; bring food for Martha's Pantry, a feeding program for indigent families; and have a communal commitment towards gender equality and other progressive social justice issues.

And this, I think, is the Word that has been given me to bring today: that despite our apparent differences of gifts, approaches, and attitudes, all of us together make up the mystical, perfect, Risen Body of Christ. For the past few months, I have been hanging out in variously furbished heavenly Temples, some with stained glass and angelic choirs, some with ceiling fans and a rather more motley crew. However, in these places, each of them filled with glory, I have heard God's people calling to one another, "Holy, Holy, Holy!" I have seen people come in sickness, in loneliness, in fear. They worry about their children, their parents, their friends. They care about the state of the world, and about the state of their own souls. They come to pray, to be physically near to one another, to share if only for a moment in the heavenly feast of love and beauty and peace.

That is what we do, too. Just like our Catholic, and

Methodist, and Presbyterian, and Baptist, and who-knows-how-else-named brothers and sisters in Christ, we gather on Sunday mornings to praise and thank God, to confess our sins, to intercede for others and to ask for help for ourselves, and finally to go out renewed and refreshed and prepared to be Christ's witness in the world. The witness I am called to give is to the wonderful diversity of the Church Universal, and even more to the amazing graciousness of God, who takes all our stumbling efforts, all our failures, all our mistakes, all our wrong turnings, and redeems them and makes them (and us!) whole.

I started out by asking if I have said "here I am" to the right call, if what I do can be described as following the Christ who calls us to heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, feed and clothe the poor. Moreover, I find that now I have more questions than when I started out. What am I doing, asking questions and observing worship in these Catholic parishes far from home, when Seekers is at a most critical time of its history? What am I doing, running an art gallery at a seminary, a place of privilege, when so many people don't have enough food to eat, a place to live, or access to health care? What am I doing, painting in my studio or writing about obscure liturgical questions, when there is so much pain and suffering in the world?

What I think I am doing is saying "Hineni. Here I am." I am coming to understand that God has called me to be a witness to the unity of Christ's Body, to beauty, to human creativity, to the truth of people's need for more than food and shelter, for more than simple survival, for bread **and** for roses. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "No one can see the realm of God without being born anew from above." "What is born of the flesh," he says, "is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit, is spirit." What is spirit but the awareness that, although we are surely flesh, that is not all that we are? Yes, we are surely embodied, but our bodily needs are not the

entirety of who we are. We need beauty, we need song, we need to make new and wonderful things that never have been thought of before, and to share those things with one another. That is what I have said "yes" to. That is what I am doing, at those churches, at the gallery, in my studio.

What have you said "yes" to? Where and how do you bear witness to the miracle of the Holy Spirit in your life? Although we are all creatures of unclean lips, the angel has touched each of us with a fiery coal, and each of us, like Isaiah, are able to answer God's call with "Hineni. Here I am. Send me."