

Here Am I

Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13)

¹ 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. ² 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. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵ 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!"

⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ 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." ⁸ 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!" ⁹ And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.'

¹⁰ Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."

¹¹ Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate;

¹² until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

¹³ Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled." The holy seed is its stump.

There are certain events in life where time seems to stop still. There are moments that divide time: what was before is changed and is no more. On the national level, Americans experienced September 11, 2001 like that. Many of us said on 9/11 that things might never be the same again. Our prophetic awareness seems to have come true in the daily news that has followed ever since.

Isaiah had one of those moments. "The year that King Uzziah died" could have been as early as 742 or as late as 736 BCE, but that king's death signaled the end of an era of relative independence for Judah. Tiglath-Pileser III came to power in Assyria in 745 BCE

and after consolidating his power in Mesopotamia began to expand his empire to include the small states in Syria and Palestine. During most of Isaiah's lifetime Judah lived under the threat of Assyrian domination, and the prophet regularly addressed the political issues facing king and country. The death of King Uzziah defined the rest of Isaiah's life.

Isaiah's story began with a theophany, an appearance of God. God appeared to Isaiah in regal brilliance, seated in the temple and attended by heavenly creatures. It was almost as if Isaiah was born anew on that day in the temple when he saw God in such immensity that the hem of God's garment filled the entire temple. The appearance of God to Isaiah obviously stresses the awesome nature of God. If only the hem, then how much more was there that could not be seen? We are left with a slim picture of the transcendence of God, and that is as it must be.

God's awesome presence defined consecration and dedication, and it was the moment of Isaiah's call. Isaiah's doubt does not seem to be rooted in feelings of inadequacy so much as in *guilt*. He identified himself as "a man of unclean lips... among a people of unclean lips," and in doing so gave voice to the problem of individual and social sin to hearing and responding to the call of God. Not only did he witness the glory of God and feel engulfed in the song of holiness praising God from that mysterious swirl of the multi-winged creatures called seraphim, but his lips were touched with a burning coal. It was a decisive moment. For most of us Isaiah's response is the ideal for making yourself available for ministry. He could no longer talk about the weather or the latest gossip on the streets...from then on he had holy business to discuss! One writer perceptively reminds us that to consecrate someone or something is not simply to transfer that person or object into the safe world of what is holy. On the contrary, there are lasting consequences to consecration. "To consecrate means... to derail from normalcy." The whole action inside that temple for Isaiah was decisive and life changing.

Yet the drama for Isaiah was not simply in what he saw; the drama was contained in what he was called to say. His understanding of God's world and his commission set him

apart as a prophet and witness for God (vv. 9-13). He was sent with a particular message—a message that perplexed and confused, rather than clarified and explained. How strange this seems to our ears, or maybe it is not so strange. We are accustomed to experts who can explain everything, who make sense of the evening news—except when they are often wrong. We expect our doctors to diagnose our every illness correctly, but then discover in the hardest of ways that disease is often more mystery than science to them.

The most perplexing language of all for the people of Isaiah's day and ours remains the language of parables. That was how Isaiah was told to speak for God. "Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes" (v. 10 NIV). How strange is that? Imagine telling teachers to teach, but the children all fail, or imagine a world where we expect police to direct traffic, but create congestion and cause accidents. Try to imagine a coach instructing his players, but they don't learn how to tackle and often drop the ball, rather than learn how and when to catch it. This is the kind of world into which Isaiah was pulled.

Even more disheartening was the fact that when Isaiah asked how long he was to proclaim the message he was told: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land." Who wants to be a part of a ministry where they see no spiritual or numeric growth, no success? But Isaiah was reminded, as we all are that the ministry and increase is in God's time, not our time. We are called to be faithful!

Most amazing of all, perhaps, this is the same situation where Jesus lived. In the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, in fact, Jesus quoted the same passage about calloused hearts, deaf ears, and blinded eyes.

Why? That is the hard question to answer, and yet it is the reality known to people of faith. You walk in the way of the Lord, and others seem to walk in a different direction.

We live among people who want to hate their enemy, and yet we hang on to a message about loving not just your neighbor but your enemy as well. We live in world of wars and rumors of wars, and yet we have a Lord who suggests that when we are weak we are strong. We live in a world that measures success by the size of our possessions, and yet we are a people who share a common meal, just a small piece of bread, as if that were sufficient for a meal, and then we have a small sip from a cup, as if that would slake our thirst.

Dare we ever speak up in this world? Some of us wonder if we have a right to speak. The answer may be that none of us has the right to speak. Even Isaiah was a man of unclean lips—but God called upon him to speak. God may call upon us as well, even to say things that may be filled with truth but may not make much worldly sense. That is what Paul said about the cross. It was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:23).

Isaiah was called to proclaim a word of judgment that was also a word of promise. He was called to persevere and endure, even though the outward picture of things might become dark and bleak. He was to know that even though the last tenth (the tithe) might be laid waste, there was yet a holy seed or a stump left. Not much, but enough. That is a parabolic faith if ever there were one. It is the same faith that has been given to us. By faith we are given light and hope in the darkest of times. Paul said that others might think we are dying "and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:9-10 NIV). Such is the cross-based faith of Christianity.

As Christians we live in a world marked by so many things that remind us of the cross, including that fateful day called simply 9/11. For you it may be when a loved one died or a child was born, or some other life event. Knowing the perplexing parabolic message of Isaiah, we have to wonder what he might have said in the aftermath of our life-changing events: "You have seen violence and experienced depression; now walk in the way of hope and peace. You have heard vindictive speech; but now we are instructed

to practice forgiveness.” We would have had trouble, naturally, seeing Isaiah’s vision or hearing his message. It is sobering to realize that God still calls prophets to speak the prophetic word the world most needs to hear. **George H. Martin**

When have you heard God’s call? Only you can accept God’s call your life. God still calls us to speak to a world that often does not want to hear or see, but we are still called to say “here am I” and be faithful in sharing the gospel and showing God’s love in the world!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.