

Isaiah 6:1-11

It was the year King Uzziah died. Or, it was the year Russia invaded Ukraine. Or it was the year 9/11 rattled the world to its core. Or it was the year Israeli was attacked by Hamas. Or it was the recent U.S. elections? It was the year when things fell apart, when foundations were shaken, when the markets crumbled, when all that had once been familiar now seemed long ago and far away. It was the year King Uzziah died.

The significant weight these words carry may easily be lost on us who have no kings, who are removed in time and history from the ancient world, who live in a democratic fluid culture. Yet, they are significant, even to us! The death of a king and particularly this king was a tumultuous event in the ancient world.

Last week, we met a prophet named Jonah. And when God specifically called Jonah to go proclaim the word, Jonah ran off in the opposite direction. Today, we meet the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah simply overheard the Lord's voice saying, "Whom should I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah volunteered: I'm here; send me." How different those two prophets are!

Today's story takes place in the year of King Uzziah's death. The year is 740 BCE. Uzziah was the tenth king of Judah. He reigned for five decades, a long time in those days. The early part of his rule was marked by faithfulness to God. But once he became powerful, he became quite arrogant and corrupt.

Uzziah's reign was marked by prosperity and military might. The king even

set up clever devices in Jerusalem on the towers and corners of the wall designed to shoot arrows and large stones. But soon after Uzziah died, a new threat was looming over the people of Judah and Jerusalem: the Assyrian empire. The nation was in turmoil. They had lived in stability and security for five decades, and now all that was under threat. The death of a long-reigning king is always an occasion of political uncertainty. Add these circumstances to the general sense of dislocation and instability that came with the death of a King, and the world as they knew it no longer existed.

It was a bad time, a shaky time, a frightening time. And so it was for Isaiah. As the grieving Isaiah entered the temple in the year that King Uzziah died, he received a vision of God that had a significant effect on him. Isaiah, probably preoccupied by his world's news and events just like anyone else in Israel, had his vision wrenched to heaven.

On the one side was King Uzziah and the rest of what constituted normal, everyday life in this world. It all seemed large and important until Isaiah saw God high and lifted up, and suddenly Isaiah found all of his perceptions and priorities re-aligned. It was this dramatic encounter with God that transformed Isaiah into one of the great prophets of God's people. What is remarkable about this narrative is the way God's work in Isaiah, and, by extension God's people, is revealed, and also the way Isaiah is called to be an instrument of God, carrying God's word and activity out into the world.

The first glimpse of God in Isaiah's vision is of grandeur, glory and the worship of the seraphim – the shining ones. There can be no question that this vision is, first and foremost, a communication to Isaiah, and through him

to the nation, that opens them to some important insights about reality. God is revealed as high and lifted up, enthroned and filling the temple with God's glory. The message is simple: kings may come and go, but God, as the Seraphim sang, is the true monarch of Israel, and of the whole earth. With the death of the king, the future may be uncertain, but God remains sovereign, to be trusted and worshipped, for security is found only in the Divine Ruler of God's people.

It is in the midst of human loss and suffering, in the midst of separation and disconnection that Isaiah sees a vision that, despite everything, is praising God from the mouths of the seraphim: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: The whole earth is full of your glory!" They are words not only of praise but of hope. Hope in the unity that we long for, a hope that in the face of whatever we might be experiencing God is being worshipped and adored.

Isaiah describes a scene both powerful and awe-inspiring, if not downright frightening. The Lord sits on an elevated throne. The words suggest that Isaiah can see the deity only from the waist down, so that Isaiah does not see God's face. Isaiah's vision is intimate and close, but also dangerous and disturbing.

The Lord's robes — from the waist down — fill the heavenly "temple". This detail indicates that Isaiah sees a massive God, evoking a sense of power and strength. The seraphs lift up God's holiness and glory. The scene conveys no hint of weakness. God is strong, holy and glorious.

When you live in communion with the Spirit of God, the splendor and beauty

of God breaks through — often in unexpected times and places — in ways that lead us to awe. In fact, new research in psychology indicates that more than any other emotion, awe leads us out of our narrow self-interest to seek the well-being of the larger group, which is a psychological way of saying, awe leads to mission.

Encounters with God are interwoven with the events in our lives. Part of becoming a “sent congregation” or a “sent person”, is learning to look and listen for God, especially at the turning points of life.

If we can have a sense of the upset connected with these events we can begin to have a sense of the climate of the time in which Isaiah saw his vision. Now, it may be that some of us feel the dislocation and disturbance in our own era, as we consider the global issues which confront us: terrorism, the economic crisis, the continuing wars, abject poverty and ecological issues.

Drifting back to the context of Isaiah’s vision we are reminded that whatever the event that is occurring, the death of King Uzziah, war, terrorism, economic meltdown, ecological crises, the death of someone we love, the anxiety and depression that afflicts us, or whatever trial we may be experiencing, God’s is being praised and is worthy of such praise.

Isaiah’s experience of God’s presence led him to a profound awareness of his own sin and the sin of his community. “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” The Judeans had forgotten and forsaken the Lord; their worship is futile;

corruption marks their leadership. Greed has led to injustice. Here, the lips are a symbol of motivations and actions, the stuff of a whole life. In the presence of the Lord of Hosts, Isaiah is touched with his own and his people's brokenness and imperfection before God.

Some scholars associate his concern about "unclean lips" with Akkadian texts depicting mouth purification rituals, in which the mouth symbolizes the entire body.

Isaiah hears the Lord say, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?", and the prophet responds "Here I am, send me!" At its root, Isaiah's cry of "Here I am!" is a response to God's presence and grace. Isaiah is not volunteering because he thinks he has skills God can use, or has time on his hands. Isaiah is laying his life before the God who encountered him and has made him whole.

Recognizing his sinfulness, Isaiah undergoes an act of intense pain to gain forgiveness. The live coal represents the cleansing fire. Isaiah's sinful lips must be burned. This passage, communicates the seriousness of sin. We do not think that sin originates in our lips, but our words often betray our sinfulness. Isaiah felt unworthy, unclean. And when he looked around at the rest of his society in the light that was streaming at him from God's throne, he knew that the rest of the world was likewise unclean, messed up, tawdry, and sinful.

Exposed in the light of God's glory, we confess that we are an imperfect people. We need God's help, and the good news is that God offers us such

help. For Isaiah it comes in the form of a burning coal borne by angel's wings and touched upon his lips. A seraph touches his mouth with a hot coal and pronounces his guilt "departed" and his sin "atoned". Though Isaiah has expressed concern for his community, this atonement applies only to him. Yet atonement so easily obtained suggests a God ready to forgive others just as quickly.

God cleansed Isaiah with fire, and then gave him a job to do. It wasn't the world's happiest assignment, by any means. Isaiah had to tell the people they were done for. But God predicts up front that they won't listen. They won't listen because they refused to see their lives on the same scale as God's grandeur. They refused to let themselves be made to feel small and lowly and tawdry.

What makes Israel's God, Isaiah's God, and our God holy, is what sets him apart from the gods and rulers of the nations. The heart of our God and King is with the poor and the hurting and the neglected—not just the strong and powerful. God calls us as his people to be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy. Being holy like God is holy, means that my heart is with whoever God's heart is with.

Not surprisingly, that eager prophet, the ready follower of the mighty Lord of the temple, who is so anxious to do the divine work, now sounds very different after hearing what God has in mind for him. Instead of "Here am I", we now hear the prophet bleat, "How long, O Lord?"

The chief work of humanity is to love God and enjoy God forever. The

enjoyment of God has apparently drained away from the plaintive cry of the prophet in the face of these divine demands. After Isaiah's fearful "how long", God gives him cold comfort by announcing that cities shall lie waste and the land will be desolate, finally presenting a vast emptiness. Somehow that stirring hymn, "Here I am, Lord", seems strangely out of place, or at least premature.

And in the midst of troubled, uncertain times — for the next forty years or so — Isaiah was God's prophet. God made Isaiah's lips clean, so that he could be God's lips, speaking God's message. Sometimes, Isaiah spoke words of confrontation and judgment. But just as often, he spoke words of hope, comfort, and healing into the dark, disturbing, confusing days in which he lived.

Like Isaiah, we live in unsettled and unsettling times. Things are changing, which is a constant in our world. But so many feel left behind. Lost. Unheard. Many are afraid of what the future holds for them, if anything. Many live in despair. In fear. In rage. In confusion. We also live in a time when so many unclean lips go unchecked, and the words they speak do real harm. We are surrounded by the walking wounded. In such times, we hope to be people with clean lips. God is calling: Whom should I send, and who will go for us? God needs us to be his lips, to speak words of hope, comfort, and healing to our wounded neighbours, to use our words to build others up, not tear them down.

And this is the fountain of our sending. We are sent to join God in mission because we have encountered God, because we have been brought face to

face with God's holiness and our brokenness, and because we have been made whole by God's grace.

Where is God calling us to today? We are called, every one of us, to do justice, show compassion and loving kindness and to walk humbly with our God. God doesn't just call Isaiahs, or Jonahs or Elishas, or Jeremiahs. God calls each and every one of us to respond to God's limitless grace, and forgiveness.

Charles Colson worked as a Special Counsel to United States President Richard Nixon between 1969 and 1973. He became known as the president's "Hatchet Man" for his willingness to do his dirty work for him. Colson also was the first member of Nixon's cabinet to be imprisoned for Watergate-related crimes. In 1973, however, the Holy Spirit transformed Mr. Colson into a Christian. The forgiven former "Hatchet Man" heard and faithfully responded to God's call to work on God's behalf with and for prisoners. His Prison Fellowship Ministry arguably did more to raise Christians' (as well as others') awareness of the need for more humane treatment of people who are incarcerated.

Reflecting on his conversion, Colson later wrote: "I left the Raytheon Company's president, Tom Phillips' house that night, my conversion shaken by the words from C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* about pride. It felt as if Lewis were writing about me, former Marine captain, Special Counsel to the President of the United States, now in the midst of the Watergate scandal. I had an overwhelming sense that I was unclean. "After talking to Tom, I found that when I got to the automobile to drive away, I couldn't. I was crying

too hard – and I was not one to ever cry. I spent an hour calling out to God. I did not even know the right words. I simply knew that I needed Him. And I knew for certain that the God who created the universe heard my cry.

“From the next morning to this day, I have never looked back. I can honestly say that the worst day of the last 35 years has been better than the best days of the 41 years that preceded it. That’s a pretty bold statement, given my time in prison, three major surgeries, and two kids with cancer at the same time, but it is absolutely true. “That’s because, for the last 35 years – whether in pain, suffering, joy, or jubilation, it makes no difference – I have known there was a purpose. I have known that I belong to Christ and that I am here on earth to advance His Kingdom.”

Similarly, Isaiah’s response to a call that has not been issued suggests eagerness to bring a message to people with whom he identifies. Unlike Moses with his myriad excuses, Isaiah is hardly able to contain his excitement, waving his hand like a student raring to speak up in class. He is Scripture’s only figure to cry out: “Here I am! Send me!” In a very few strokes the story paints a prophet who, despite discouragement, remains eager to mediate between God and his community.

There’s an old prayer that’s often attributed to Francis of Assisi: Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

God is calling us, his people, to be his instruments of peace. His invitation

extends to us, from Isaiah's day to our own: Whom should I send, and who will go for us? May you and I — all of us — respond as Isaiah did: I'm here; send me.

We don't come to worship just to have our so-called "felt needs" met but also to find out just what our needs really are! We don't come to chum around with the God we want, but to encounter the true God in ways that make us into the kind of people God wants!

What we are called to say to our world is that the last are first, the least are greatest, and the greatest among us is a servant. Such two thousand year old words have regularly been met by dull ears, sightless eyes, and clouded minds; all of which have led again and again to wasted cities and empty lands, ravaged by wars and famines and hopelessness.

By all means, respond to the call of God. But be careful to know that the call is never easy, never simple to grasp, never designed for ready comfort and success.

Amen.

Prayers of the People for November 17, 2024

Loving God, help us to open our eyes, to see your presence in the world and in our lives. Open our eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to care, and the strength to work for wholeness and healing toward your beloved kingdom of grace and mercy. Help us to share the good news of your redeeming and extravagant love with others.

Loving God, there are so many around the world who have been displaced — by flood and fire, famine, political warfare, through economic and climate crises. May you provide for their every need that they be fed and cared for, and may they find kindness on their journeys. Lead them to a safe place, to find comfort under the shelter of your wings. May they find their home in you.

For those who have experienced loss – of homes, jobs, good health, and of loved ones, may they find your love and the light of your promises to be enough for the next step. Lead them to a place of hope, to find glimpses of joy in their journey. Bind up their wounds – so tenderly – and fill them again with your goodness and mercy.

For those who have wandered far from you – who feel forsaken, forgotten, or fearful, may they find your comforting presence in whatever their circumstances, and realize that you are not so far off after all. May they trust in your extravagant and boundless love and run into your outstretched arms with joy.

For all who bear the burden and privilege of leadership in public life whether in political, military or religious spheres: equip them with wisdom, fortitude and resolve in the ongoing work of reconciliation and peace. May leaders at every level learn to speak in favour of humanity and justice. May hearts of anger, and hatred be turned to hearts of love and compassion.

We pray for our broken world that increasingly seems to set us against one another in polarizing positions that cause a rising intolerance and fear of the ‘other’, that raises distrust and suspicion about intentions and others’ actions, that causes walls and barriers against true understanding; that fosters aggression and violence and harm to be done to the lives of others. We pray especially for the people suffering war conditions and the threat of war; in Ukraine, Gaza, West Bank, Lebanon, Sudan and Haiti. We pray for peacemakers and peacekeepers, who seek to keep this world secure and free; that all people can walk the path of peace, the path of forgiveness, the path of equality.

We offer prayers for those voices that are unheard or that have been silenced. We ask for your spirit of reconciliation to be near; that there may be an end to bullying in schools, harassment in homes and workplaces, a reform of systems that perpetuate discriminatory laws and practices. May we hear and respond to the call to be bearers of peace and to spread this vision through love and solidarity.

We pray for the church, that we may love one another in practice as well as in prayer. We pray for: Grace Lutheran & South Peace United in Dawson Creek - Rev. Marilyn Carroll (United), Deo Lutheran in Salmon Arm - Rev. Erik Bjorgan; the congregation of The Place and their leaders; our sister congregation in Peru and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land; for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Anne Germond, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers. Bless all joint initiatives in worship, fellowship and service to the community.

Let your healing love be known this day by all who suffer in body, distress of mind, or agony of spirit. Let your intimate love be known today by all who feel forgotten or lost, and all who are walking in the dark valley of despair. Pour out your healing on all who need it - especially, Bishop Kathy, Pastor Kristin Steele, and Jean McKain. Be generous with your transforming love for those we name aloud or in the silence of our hearts ... Bring your healing power to all who need it in their lives.

And lastly, we pray, for those of us who are comfortable – safe, healthy and secure. We heartily thank you for your many blessings. May we be agents of your blessing to others as we seek the peace and prosperity for all who live in our community. Lead us to those whom you look upon with compassion – the overworked, the underfed, the homeless, the neglected and the depressed. Fill us with your grace and mercy and love, that we may be healers in your name.

Loving God, we pray for your church that your Spirit work in and through is to be beacons of hope, grace, love and light in this world. May our open doors reflect your open arms to all. May our arms and hands reaching out to those in need reflect your love for all. May our forgiveness of one another reflect your forgiveness for all.

Amen.

Let us pray as Jesus taught ...

Our Father ...