

Isaiah 6:1-8 “A Vision the Holy” Rev. Jim Schubert St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Prescott, AZ

Today we are going to look at the Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah. We encounter a vision that Isaiah had-the type of vision, or visitation from God, that most of us do not experience. It is somewhat terrifying and I do not know if any of us could handle it. But it is the unveiling of the barrier that stands between our daily, mundane life, and the powerful presence of God that is active behind the scenes. Isaiah was one of the great Old Testament prophets. But he was not the type of prophet we often think of-the grizzled old guy wandering in from the desert dressed in a ragged cloak and living in poverty, -proclaiming insight from above. No. He was married and had a somewhat privileged position in life-actually being very close to the court of the rulers-one of the rulers being King Uzziah.

It begins, “In the year of King Uzziah’s death...” King Uzziah died in about 740 BC.

A little background: Things were going well for the country. King Uzziah was a good leader and there was a lot of prosperity during his rule. Priests and prophets advised and prayed, rulers such as Uzziah governed. Part of their prayer life for the nation was going into the sanctuary and burning incense. Incense represented the prayers of the people drifting toward heaven. This religious ritual was an acknowledgement of the **supreme power** guiding human activity. This was a somewhat good balance. Civil life with enlightened ruler. A prayerful religious community supporting the work of officials. Divine providence working itself out in our community decisions.

But-there is something in human nature that just can’t leave good things alone. Why is that? I don’t have the answer; maybe you can talk to a philosopher or psychologist about that. You fill up your car for months with gas and when it gets full the nuzzle turns itself off. Works great. But one day you just decide to give it another hit, -mess with it, just to get a few more miles of fuel, and it overflows and goes all over your shoes.

Despite that things were going well, at some point Uzziah decided he wanted to get tangled up with the religious life of nation. He decided that he would like to also do the religious ceremonial stuff. And one day he decided that he would take over the burning of the incense. He was told by the priests-No. You govern, and we will pray. Stay out of the sanctuary. But he insisted on getting his way. Some people just can’t stand not being in charge of everything.

What happened? Almost immediately there were consequences. Now you can call it karma, or just bad genes, or coincidence, or God’s judgement...you make up your mind. But- King Uzziah was struck down with leprosy, a dreaded disease that turned you into a person that others could not live around. He was put in a small house, all by himself, isolated from the community, and his son took over being the king. And then he died after a few years. All alone. It is interesting that his tomb was discovered in 1931. I saw a photograph of it. Do you know what it said on his tombstone? “Here lies King Uzziah. Do not open!”

So-there is lot behind that opening sentence here in Isaiah 6-“In the year King Uzziah died.” It then continues with Isaiah’s vision of the holy: “**I saw the Lord Yahweh...**” When the world gets out of balance-and that is what happened here-that is often when God interrupts in interesting ways.

What does he see? Isaiah sees the Lord Almighty seated on a high throne. Above him stood things called “seraphs.” These are heavenly beings which literally are “the burning ones.” These creatures have 6 wings-two over the face, two over the feet, and two for flying. Not your average house pets, are they. They cry out “**Holy, Holy, Holy.**” The foundations shake and the Temple is filled with smoke.

And Isaiah is so overcome with the power of this **Holy Presence** that he shrinks in humility and says basically, - what a wretched man I am. I am totally lost and am a man of unclean lips and live among a

people of unclean lips and my eyes are on the Lord of the Universe. In other words, he is so aware of the Holy Presence that he has a profound knowledge of his own sin -and others' and how blind we often all are to this spiritual realm. I am unclean and so are the people I live with.

Then one of the seraphs comes to him with a hot coal in a pair of tongs and touches his mouth. "See now," it says, "your sin is taken away." Then there is a voice-it is of the Lord. The voice says, "Whom shall I send? Who will be my messenger?" Isaiah answers, "**Here I am. Send me.**"

Now I don't know about you, but if I was in Isaiah's place- when those things started coming at me with those tongs, holding that hot piece of coal, I think I would run as fast as I could in the opposite direction. Not me, Lord, how about-that guy over there, or her, over there-they would do a fine job. I want to stay on this other side of glory-it is a lot safer. I don't need to know all this. I'm fairly happy with my life. Oh, I have a few problems...but--- Pick someone else!

But Isaiah is not me, or you. He was of a different breed. Not everyone is granted this direct a view of the heavenly realm. Partly because we probably could not handle it. Remember Moses. He went up the mountain to receive the 10 Commandments. When he came down he had to wear a veil because he was still glowing from the **Divine encounter**. He had to shield the people from this overwhelming energy. And later in the New Testament Paul says he was transported to a 3rd heaven (2 Cor. 1-4) where he "heard and saw things which must not and should not and cannot be put into human language." Another **Divine Encounter**. I have always wondered what his experience was. He just will not talk about it.

Well, after this vision, Isaiah became a great prophet of the people, preaching on the importance of repentance and speaking of God's great redeeming grace. Following this vision he preached of the divine energy that lies just beyond our common understanding of life. He suddenly knew that "Holy, Holy, Holy" is thundering above daily life, -but we are not always aware of it. The politicians and kings and power-brokers go about their business, thinking they know it all, but they are blind and deaf. King Uzziah thought he could handle it all. And he is not the only one who has tried to politicize the Holy. You fill in the blanks.

What is evident is that there is a gap between the frightening, energy-filled, yet also grace-filled **Divine Presence** -kind of a strange combination-a gap between this **holy energy** and my routine daily life.

And then-thank goodness, **Jesus enters the world**. He is, in a sense, a middle-man between the Father and us-between the raw Divine Energy and us, He came to us in this world and understood our weaknesses and our blindness. He has taken that raw power that Isaiah encountered and has filtered it for us-so we can handle it. He lived with humans and through healings, teachings, ways of being with people, and definitely the passing on of the **Holy Eucharist**-gave us a "taste of feast" since quite honestly, we probably could not handle the full banquet and the full glory right now. To receive forgiveness and purpose, Isaiah had to face the tongs. Through Jesus and our prayer of confession, and specifically the Holy Eucharist, we are spared that experience. We are so fortunate to be living after the time of Jesus and the Resurrection and the coming of the Spirit. So fortunate..

Today-on Trinity Sunday we will sing, or say, during our services, "**Holy, Holy, Holy.**" Remember Isaiah's vision when you share these words with your Christian brothers and sisters. This visitation to Isaiah was his special call. We are not Isaiah but are all called in our special ways and can also echo that "Holy, Holy, Holy" in the 21st Century. For the presence of God still hovers above our daily lives. I say, thank you Jesus for showing us a sense of this holiness through your life amongst us and now your presence with us every day, and especially as we worship together and sing "Holy, Holy, Holy." Amen