

Isaiah 6:1-8

*In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, the edges of his robe filling the temple. 2 Winged creatures were stationed around him. Each had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two their feet, and with two they flew about. 3 They shouted to each other, saying:*

*"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of heavenly forces!*

*All the earth is filled with God's glory!"*

*4 The doorframe shook at the sound of their shouting, and the house was filled with smoke.*

*5 I said, "Mourn for me; I'm ruined! I'm a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips. Yet I've seen the king, the Lord of heavenly forces!"*

*6 Then one of the winged creatures flew to me, holding a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 He touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed."*

*8 Then I heard the Lord's voice saying, "Whom should I send, and who will go for us?"*

*I said, "I'm here; send me."*

It was the year 738BC. King Uzziah had recently died and a man named Isaiah is in the temple praying. He has come to the temple because things are not going very well and he needs God. Judah is being threatened by its northern neighbor, Assyria. Assyria has already taken control over the northern Kingdom and it is only a matter of time before the Southern kingdom will fall as well. The situation seemed hopeless and Isaiah is experiencing despair.

Despair is the feeling you get when something has gone terribly wrong and you believe with every fiber of your being that the wrong will never be right again. Change has occurred and you have been thrust into new territory. Your footing is unsure. You do not know what will happen next. What do you do when all about you seems unclear and the future is uncertain? Isaiah would tell you to do as he did – go to holy ground and pray.

It is an ordinary prayer from an ordinary man but something happens that changes his life. Suddenly, he finds himself in the middle of a vision. The temple has been transformed – it is filled with the rim of God's heavenly garment. Seraphs are singing and praising God. The temple cannot contain the glory of God's presence and it fills with smoke and begins to shake. In that moment, Isaiah is struck by total awe. He is in the presence of holiness. Suddenly, his fight with his wife that morning seems unimportant. The petty argument with his neighbor concerning a missing ram seems trivial. The political maneuvering between the priests seems distasteful. Even the uncertain future of Judah seems irrelevant. In the presence of God, Isaiah came to the full awareness that God is God and Isaiah is not.

Isaiah was struck with total awe in the presence of holiness. Reality flashed before his eyes in an instant. He saw himself for who he was and for who God was. He had been

deceiving himself his entire life. His ambitions were turned to dust in an instant. He suddenly recognized who was at the center of the universe and it was not Isaiah or his family or his government or even the high priest – it was God. He was ashamed. He was standing in God's presence and he realized his own unworthiness to be there. He was a man of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips.

Isaiah's life in that moment became transparent. All those dark corners where we hide the parts of ourselves we do not want others to see were immediately illuminated. He was totally exposed. He was silent because no other response was appropriate. But his lament had already been heard. His confession had already been accepted and forgiveness was on its way. A seraph flew to him with a hot coal in his hand and burned his lips. The seraph was not just offering forgiveness; it was offering worthiness to be in the presence of God. Suddenly, Isaiah's past was blotted away.

Worship is where we come into God's presence in total awe. In that awe we recognize that we are not the ones who control the earth. We are not the ones who control the moon and stars. We are not the ones who control the night and the day. We can not control the seasons or the weather or the clouds. We cannot control our neighbor or our loved ones. In fact, sometimes we are even called to admit we cannot even control ourselves. We have spent hours and days of the last week trying to get everyone to do what we want them to do. We wanted everyone to see things our way and do things our way. But in God's presence, we are struck to confess as Isaiah confessed, we are people of unclean lips. And that is when we are touched by the hot coal of forgiveness and pardon. The guilt is removed from us and we can stand once again and walk forward as healed and whole children of God, ready to hear God and ready to respond.

Despair is present in our world today. We feel the despair of the people of Ukraine, fighting to keep their sovereignty. We feel the feeling of despair as the people in Gaza try to survive and we feel the despair of Israel trying to exist as a nation. We feel the despair of those being removed from the families, the jobs, and the communities where they have invested decades of their life and being sent to detention centers where they are treated as less than human. We feel the despair of the economic shifts that are threatening the livelihood of many farms and small businesses. We feel the despair of families losing their homes and their loved ones in record floods.

Just as we come here today, many have found comfort for their despair in gathering with community in the presence of God. We find hope in worship. We find hope in singing. We find hope in one another. We find hope in a Word from the Lord. We find purpose in the forgiveness God offers and also in the call God extends. Isaiah hears that call and boldly answers, Here Am I, send me.

That is usually where we end the reading and where we end the sermon but today, we will hear what Paul Harvey called, "the rest of the story." We are each called in different ways and to different ministries. Some are called to teach, some are called to heal, some are called to encourage, some are called to welcome, some are called to presence, some

are called to share joy. We have different gifts but they are all needed. The list could go on and on.

Isaiah was called to be a prophet, God's spokesperson. He was called to relay the very words God would put into his mouth without changing anything. But as we read forward, we realize that Isaiah was called to be a failure. Hear these words

*God said, "Go and say to this people:*

*Listen intently, but don't understand;*

*look carefully, but don't comprehend.*

*10 Make the minds of this people dull.*

*Make their ears deaf and their eyes blind,*

*so they can't see with their eyes*

*or hear with their ears,*

*or understand with their minds,*

*and turn, and be healed."*

*11 I said, "How long, Lord?"*

*And God said, "Until cities lie ruined with no one living in them, until there are houses without people and the land is left devastated." 12 The Lord will send the people far away, and the land will be completely abandoned. 13 Even if one-tenth remain there, they will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, which when it is cut down leaves a stump. Its stump is a holy seed.*

No one wants to be called to be a failure. Not me. Not you. Not Isaiah. But while it might appear to be a failure to Isaiah, the future will tell a different story. Those oracles of Isaiah that even he did not understand? They will be remembered for generations to come. Isaiah was faithful to share what God told him even when he did not get it.

God was right. The people will not repent. Jerusalem would soon be dust and the Temple would be in ruins and the people would lose the land and be hauled into exile. But in exile, that sacred stump will be revealed and they will cling to Isaiah's words with hope that there was a Messiah coming and there will be a new kingdom, an eternal kingdom. A Kingdom that will never be destroyed. A Kingdom where there are no more tears, no more despair, no more death. This promise was beyond their comprehension so they looked for a political king and a political empire. As they grew to expect another King David, many of them ended up missing the Messiah when he did arrive. Jesus came and they did not recognize him.

In this year 2025, I fear Christians are once again repeating the mistake by putting our trust in political empires and not in the Kingdom of God. There is a way to avoid that mistake. Let's follow Jesus. Let's love as Jesus loved. Let's serve as Jesus served. Let's forgive as Jesus forgave. Let's share the grace that Jesus has showered upon us. The Messiah has come and we have witnessed the mighty power of the Holy Spirit. Let's keep our eyes and hearts open to what God will do next.