

Nov. 15, 2020 -- (Pentecost 25, God Calls Isaiah)

Sermon Text – Isaiah 6:1-8

- In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty... The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 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...Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 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." 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!" -

I imagine that the life of a temple priest in Jerusalem was not usually so exciting. There were probably days that were filled with activity, like when the animals were being brought in for sacrifice. If you were part of the team chosen to present the animals or to wield the knife, as they were slaughtered, then there was much to do. But if you were simply serving within the four walls of the building, then life would be simpler. There would be some candles to light, some incense to burn and some offerings to place before the altar, but it'd be kind of quiet. One would not expect to have such a calm and routine existence shattered by an overwhelming vision of the majesty of God. But these were not normal times. These were times when Isaiah's world, and the world of those around him, had been turned upside down. One biblical commentator, writing on this passage, describes it like this. "[This] 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, if I may interject, like the year 2020, when the entire world has been invaded by a viral pandemic, when leadership, usually charged with responsibility for dealing with such things, has been baffled about what to do, when the measures they finally devised have had devastating effects on the economic well-being of those who could no longer do business, when people ended up being isolated and alone, avoiding one another, so as to slow down the spread of the disease. In other words, this has been a year "when things fell apart," nothing has been as it was, and everything has changed.

I don't know if that's what led Isaiah to have his grand vision of God, but it could certainly have been playing on his mind. It was the year that king Uzziah died. He had been king for more than 40 years. I don't think any of us know what that would be like. Presidents serve only a maximum of 8 years. Bishop Jon has been our bishop for more than 15. He will be done next August. Queen Elizabeth will serve a much longer period, but I don't think her job description is anything like the kings and

queens of old. They were the entire government. When Uzziah began his reign, he was young and energetic. Things went well. He was faithful to God and the nation prospered. But the writer of 2nd Chronicles says that “when [Uzziah] had become strong he grew proud, to his destruction.” Success and prosperity moved him to be faithless and uncaring when it came to God, and led to the decline of the nation. As he grew older, he became sickly and despondent. He died an outcast, suffering from leprosy, and excluded from his own house because of his disease. Though his son Jotham had already taken over many of the day to day functions of the king, the question still arose in the time of transition as to what would happen now that Uzziah was dead. Would the new king restore the nation to its former prosperity as a nation faithful to God, or would he allow it to decline further as an ungrateful and faithless nation? Transitions are always times of uncertainty. They are periods during which citizens naturally wonder what is going to happen. Throw a difficult and highly contagious disease on top of that and life gets really complicated.

In the middle of it all, Isaiah has a vision. He sees God seated on a throne, high and lifted up, far above the limits of the seemingly tiny temple. The very bottom of God’s robe more than fills the capacity of the building. Terrifying angels accompany God’s presence and praise him with songs loud enough to shake the temple’s very foundations. The place fills with smoke and Isaiah expects that he is witnessing the end of the world. As Eugene Peterson interprets in his “The Message” version of the Bible, Isaiah responds by crying out, “Doom! It’s Doomsday! I’m as good as dead! Every word I have ever spoken is tainted --- blasphemous even! And the people I live with talk the same way, using words that corrupt and desecrate.” It’s a bad time and Isaiah knows it. More importantly, it’s a bad time and Isaiah knows that he has no hope. He is doomed. His words alone have led him in that direction. Only God can save him from his impending destruction. So, God sends one of the angels with a coal that burns from the fire on the altar and touches it to Isaiah’s lips. It is a horrible image. I cannot imagine the searing pain it would cause. But fire is a symbol of purification. It cleanses as it burns. Isaiah is now well-prepared to speak on behalf of God. In the midst of the cacophony and the pain, he hears the voice of the Lord asking, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And he answers, “Here am I; send me!”

See what I mean? It’s not what you’d expect on a typical day in the life of a priest. But maybe we should. Annie Dillard, a sometime critic of the church’s life, writes in a book called “Teaching a Stone to Talk” about what might happen if God were to show up on a Sunday morning the way God did for Isaiah. She writes, “Does anybody have the foggiest idea of [the] kind of power that we are dealing with here

in worship?...It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats [or other kinds of ordinary] hats to church. We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may awake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return." And if that happens, what choice will we have but to respond like Isaiah, wondering if we are about to experience our own doomed future. As I am writing this, I am wondering how many more times we will be able to meet together under current conditions. The county officials in Kandiyohi County have already asked people, businesses and organization to limit in-person contact between people. Many of the churches have already stepped back to online worship only. The Benson school district will begin a new round of distance learning on Tuesday and will carry it through for at least the better part of three weeks. Our congregation's leadership has always said that we will take our cue from the school. Will we be able to continue to meet? And if we do step back, which seems likely, when will we be able to get back together again? I don't know. It depends on the virus. And it depends on us. We are in a time of transition, and we won't know the future until we have a reliable vaccine and we get enough people vaccinated that we can get the spread of the virus under control.

Isaiah is given the task of taking God's word and speaking it to a people who will not listen or understand. His test will not be easy. Neither will ours. Whether we are called to proclaim a word that will move people forward through the time of transition, or we are called to listen and understand what lies ahead, it will be a hard and difficult job. Think about how much our views of the coronavirus pandemic have changed over the last eight months. It almost seems comical to think that, in the beginning, we believed we might have to miss a few weeks, or at most, a few months of worshiping together or being in school together or gathering at our favorite establishments together or attending concerts or sporting events together, and then we'd be back to business as usual. "Yes, we might have to delay the celebration of Easter by a few weeks," we told one another, "but the season of Easter goes on for eight Sundays, so there would certainly be plenty of time for a full celebration of Easter!" Now, I wonder if we will be able to have a full Easter festival of worship next year, or will we still be dealing with these hybrid forms of doing things in order to keep each other safe? This is hard, but what are we going to do? Isaiah didn't ask for his vision. He just happened to be there when God showed up. And that's the good news! Given the hard circumstances, God shows up. We're not alone to face the harsh reality before us. God is there with us, to lead us and to guide us and watch over us through the tough times that lie ahead.

In the World War II movie "Fury," one of the soldiers in the tank unit portrayed in the film is appropriately nicknamed "Bible," because of his penchant for quoting biblical verses. He sits at the gunner position of a Sherman tank, as he and his fellow crewmates await near-certain death from an approaching German battalion. The war is nearing its end, but their mission is vital. They must hold their position. As they wait, "Bible" quotes to the crew: "There's a Bible verse I think about sometimes; many times; it goes, 'Then I heard the voice of the LORD, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' (*Filled with emotion, he*] pauses and clears his throat). And I said, 'Here am I; send me.'" I pray that our circumstance is not so dire. But here we are. We struggle against an enemy that clearly has the ability to kill us. What will happen as the battle continues is not yet certain. But we are called upon to hold our position and carry out our mission. We have a word to speak and a message to proclaim. It will be hard, but what else are we to do? God is with us and God has made us ready. When we hear the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" what else can we say but, "Here am I; send me."

Amen.