

Here I am, Lord! Now What?

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Texts: Isaiah 6:1-13 and 2 Timothy 4: 1-5

Some time ago Debbie and I were having dinner with two friends. We were talking about the current political climate. We were trying to put the current situation into some sort of context.

We reached a conclusion that evening which may seem a little depressing. I'll put it in a nutshell.

There never was a Golden Age when our national leaders did what is right because it is right. There never was a time when God's people entrusted their comfort, prosperity, security, and interests to God rather than to the alliances they have forged, international treaties, political astuteness and military power. We search history, even salvation history, in vain for a time when we were *not* stiff-necked, fearful, fretting, anxious lovers of half-truths and political spin.

The Prophet Isaiah reminds us this morning that our bad habits are old habits. And they die hard.

As our text opens, it is the year of King Uzziah's death, 742 B.C.E. Isaiah, the prophet who was also a priest, comes into the temple to do what priests do, to invoke the presence of God and to intercede on behalf of the people. The people are present in the prayers of the priest even though at that precise moment some of them are out working their fields and flocks, and others are transacting the business of markets and nations.

As incense fills the air, Isaiah bows in prayer in the holiest place in all the nation of Judah, the temple at Jerusalem. There is much on Isaiah's mind. The death of a king. The insecurity of a region. Assyrian power grows, threatening the stability and the independence of Babylon and Syria, Israel and Judah.

Over the next few years Judah will find itself alone politically as smaller states ally themselves against the growing power of Assyria. Judah's infamous "covenant with death" still lies a few years in the future, when the proud and prosperous Judeans, having replaced their brick houses with homes of stone, will boast that they have entered into a contract with Sheol, and have found their refuge in falsehood.

But Isaiah, the priest, sees, already in the hearts and on the lips of his people, their future lies forming. No stranger to the royal court of Judah, Isaiah knows the practices of diplomats, officials and kings. He knows the cynicism that parades as wisdom. He knows that his people enjoy the fruits of their lies.

Bowing in prayer in this holy place, Isaiah is overwhelmed by God's presence. Isaiah's words crack under the strain of their sacred load. Isaiah says: *"I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up; and the hem of his robe filled the temple."*

"Seraphs," Isaiah tells us, *"were in attendance around God."*

Ah, angels. But we're not talking about kindly, sweet, fat cherubs, here. We're not talking Clarence the Angel from "It's A Wonderful Life," and we're certainly not talking about those "Precious Moments" angels with their sweet smiles and cozy tummies. *These are real*

angels: “*Personified lightening*,” as one commentator describes them, guarding the throne of Adonai, coiling through the air, ready and able to strike down the piety and presumption of mere mortals.¹

Yet even these fierce celestial beasts, these sacred dragons guarding the Lord’s altar, cower and cover their eyes at the sight of God. And their feet, their creaturely vulnerability, they cover also in the presence of God, in reverence, and in recognition of their own weakness in contrast to God’s might. The presence of these terrifying angelic beasts heightens the drama of meeting the Lord. We might die of fright to meet the seraphim. But the seraphim cower in the presence of the God they serve.

“*And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God’s glory.’*”

At that moment, Isaiah understands the meaning of the song sung by the seraphim. The foundations of the great temple begin to rock and reel, the hinges of the great doors which are set in the cornerstones of the temple shake as though to proclaim by their frailty that nothing can hold God, not even all of creation, and certainly no house built by human hands.

Isaiah asks us to imagine the unimaginable, the unveiling of God in the presence of a human being, at that moment when the mystery of God stands revealed, and the only protection the prophet has against being swallowed up and destroyed by this vision is that God graciously shrouds the divine glory in smoke.

Isaiah laments: “*Woe is me! I am lost. I am undone. I die here, now. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!*”

No one can see God and survive to tell the tale. God hides from us so that we can live. To see God is to die. It’s that simple.

This is the ultimate boundary. The boundary with the holy.

Even something of *Isaiah the priest*, in his element in the courts of the earthly king, apparently must die in order to become *Isaiah the prophet*, sent forth from the court of the King of heaven and earth.

Smoke surrounds Isaiah. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.

“*Then one of the seraphs flew to me,*” Isaiah says, “*holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with the burning coal and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’*”

There stands between Isaiah the privileged priest and Isaiah the prophet a purging fire, a fire that consumes the lies he has carried on his lips and heard from the lips of his people.

Isaiah is compelled to confess his sin. And immediately after the assurance of pardon spoken by the seraph, Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, “*Whom shall I send and who*

¹ I am indebted to Otto Kaiser for his analysis of seraphim, *Isaiah 1-12*, The Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, second edition, 1983, 125-126.

will go for us?”

And Isaiah answers, “*Here am I; send me!*”

This is where most of our sermons on Isaiah chapter six stop.

We get to our feet at this point and we sing, “*Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.*” I love this hymn, don’t you?! It has become one of my favorites.

We sing these stirring words, and we feel inspired.

There are times when the hymnody of the church underscores, reinforces and illustrates a biblical message, sending the Word of God like an arrow straight into our hearts. But there are other times when a biblical text may take issue with our hymns, arguing against them, disputing their lyrics.

This is such a time.

The problem, at least in this context today, is that the biblical text does not run in the same direction as our sentiments. But, the biblical text does not run in the same direction as Isaiah’s sentiments either.

After Isaiah answers, “*Here am I; send me!*” the Lord says, “*Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’ 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.*”

What is going on here?

Karl Barth, the great Reformed theologian, says of this passage: “This is a *dreadful* message for the hearers, but *even more dreadful* for the speaker who has nothing to impart to the people of God among all the peoples but that it is too late to receive any other word, and that it cannot and will not and shall not understand any other.”²

The Protestant Reformer, John Calvin, in his commentary on this passage, says that Isaiah will need to hold in his heart the remembrance of this moment of calling, when he met God face to face and received personally God’s commission, *because if he doesn’t hold onto this moment of calling, he will not be able to stay the course and do what God has called him to do.*³

Poor Isaiah. Can you imagine his position? He thrills to the majesty of God’s presence. The whole earth is full of God’s glory. Isaiah has witnessed it for himself.

The burden of his uncleanness and his people’s uncleanness, the filth of lies and falsehoods he carried into the temple as a priest — all of this sin is purged by the fire of God.

And, so, Isaiah is ready to spread the good news of the glory, the wonder, gracious

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV. 3. 580-581.

³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, Volume I. 214.

forgiveness and redemptive power of God.

“Whom shall I send?” asks the Lord.

“Here I am. Send me,” answers Isaiah. And what shall I tell your people, Lord? Shall I tell them to hear the good news of the gospel? Shall I comfort them with the promise of God’s cleansing presence and awesome mercy?

“No,” answers the Lord, “My people have become so steeped in lies that they cannot discern truth from falsehood. Tell them that they will listen in vain for good news from me. Tell them that they will look for God, and not find me. And because their hearts have become fat at the expense of righteousness and justice, let their minds grow as dull as one who has eaten and drunk too much in the middle of the day and dozes stupified through the afternoon.”

Isaiah must have swallowed hard at this because he asks God: *“How long is this going to be my message?”*

Like any good preacher Isaiah must be wondering just how much bad news he is expected to deliver before he can get to the punch line of the good news again.

God answers: “Until their cities lie in waste without an inhabitant, and not a single house is occupied, and the land is utterly desolate; until I send everyone into exile. And vast will be the emptiness of the land. If even a tenth remain, I will burn them out; like a terebinth or an oak, they will burn until only the stump remains. The holy seed is the stump.”

Isaiah swallows hard again, but this time the lump in his throat remains, and I suspect it never entirely went away..

In his excellent study of biblical prophecy, Walter Brueggemann says that “it is the business of kings to attach the word ‘forever’ to everything we treasure. The great dilemma is that religious functionaries are expected to use the same ‘forever,’ to attach it to things and make it sound theologically legitimated.”⁴

This is precisely where Isaiah’s prophecy hits us isn’t it.

Our desire is to give comfort, especially to those who are most like us, whose views coincide with our own. We want to speak happy news, to rush to grace bypassing judgment, especially judgment that includes us and our own special sins. We seek to remove the painful consequences of bad choices, to confuse the excusing of wickedness for the forgiveness of the wicked. And in doing this, we betray the commission which God has placed on our lips with coals of fire.

We are called in Jesus Christ, in whom and through whom we share the Spirit of Truth, not to be religious spin doctors, writing apologetics for our favorites, for our political parties, nor even for our nation and leadership.

We are called in Jesus Christ to be a priesthood that includes every believer and to

⁴Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 47.

prophecy which strangely never allows the prophet to feel morally superior, but always draws us into deeper longing and lamentation.

We are called in Jesus Christ to be physicians of the soul. If we fail to diagnose truly our own ills and the illnesses of our people, we shall fail to do what God has called and sent us to do.

Isaiah reminds us of this. Isaiah reminds us of our calling.

Isaiah also reminds us that it is possible to be both prophet and priest at the same time. But we must never forget who is king. We can bear the people in our hearts, only if we bear also God's full and redemptive purposes for them in our hearts as well. And it is here we must leave Isaiah before we (in an attempt to tie everything up with a nice bow) indulge in our own falsehoods.

Ernest Hemingway once said that writers tend to lie at the beginning and the end of a story. The same holds true for preachers.

We so want to leave the congregation with a happy thought, a positive practical message ready for application, that we sometimes forget that if we cannot say at the end of a sermon, "*Thus saith the Lord*," we have stepped outside the office to which we are called, and have exchanged the mantle of this vocation for something else and something less.

And nothing less will do.

Those whose ears are itching for some message that confirms what they already believe, that reinforces their sense of self-righteousness at the expense of those with whom they disagree, do not need from their physician something to dull their pain or a nice scratch behind their itching ears; they need the truth so they can be healed.

To attempt to resolve the tension at the close of chapter six of Isaiah is to lose the wonder of both the judgment and the gracious deliverance promised to a failed people.

Isaiah will not draw back from proclaiming what God told him to preach. The deliverance which God promises is beyond the power of Isaiah and it is beyond the power of his hearers. Real deliverance is never within our grasp. Isaiah's people cannot save themselves from themselves. And neither can we save ourselves. But the Lord promises to provide the seed of redemption in the burnt-out stump; and the name of the seed will be Emmanuel.

This is the Good News. And this is where our calling begins.

As Isaiah said, "Here am I. Send me."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.