

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, November 17, 2024

As we continue in our worship and as we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, a bit of context for us this day. Last week if you with us or if you watched the rerecorded uh sermon that I had to preach right there on Thursday afternoon because our live stream cut off, you are aware that we studied Jonah together, and we learned of the Prophet going in the opposite direction of the place that God was calling him. This morning we continue in our study of the prophets as we read from Isaiah together. We should know or perhaps you're familiar that Isaiah is divided into three parts, and the first part lasts just over 30 chapters of Isaiah. It's called Proto Isaiah. It's the first of three parts, and we can date it pretty well to around 750 BCE. So that's the time in which this writing is happening, right there kind of in the middle of the 700s, and it's an important thing that we pay attention to the context. Jeanene already spoke to our children about kind of the scene itself, okay, The scene is this supernatural sort of multisensory symphony, as one commentator described it, as the temple furnishings kind of take on life. That's what we're going to hear as we read from the prophet together. It reminded me a bit of y'all remember Beauty and the Beast, right, where everything that's inanimate kind of takes on life, And that's really part of what seems to be happening in this kind of magical scene that we'll read together from the prophet. We're going to read from Isaiah, chapter 6, verses 1-8 together, so you can turn to that in your Pew Bible or in your own Bible if you brought it with you. Before we read from God's word together, let us join our hearts and minds in prayer.

Gracious Spirit, meet us here. Meet us here with your peace, here with your comfort, here with your challenge. Meet us here and open us that we might hear your word for us, not just for us but for your church this day. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said,

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

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, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” 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!”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

In preparing for this morning's sermon there was a line that a friend had pointed out to me early this week that I just couldn't shake, a line for the text that we have just read together. It's the first line, the first part, in fact, of the first verse. It gives the context of the prophet's work in the year that King Uzziah died. As Isaiah is recounting this scene that he has experienced, he is careful to point out that this was a particular time— 742 BCE. That's when King Uzziah died. We're able

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to date that. In the year King Uzziah died. There is so much wrapped up in just those few words. We are able to learn from the time that Isaiah assigns to this vision that this is a time of political transition in the life of God's people. It's always an interesting and challenging time when leadership transitions, right, but for a king like Uzziah, who took the throne at 16, who by all accounts was deeply faithful and a good king, who led a life of service. For him to pass away would have marked a really significant moment in the life of God's people, of how they were being called to live and move through the world. They would have had questions about what was coming next. They would not have had a clear vision for what that would look like. In the year King Uzziah died—that is the time when Isaiah the prophet is called.

But before we get to that call, we need to talk about his posture toward it. It's obviously this incredible scene that is taking place. There's seraphs flying around, six winged creatures, two of the wings cover their eyes, two their feet, and two they fly with, right? The robe of the Lord is covering everything, and they begin to sing, these seraphs do, one to another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory." I had a pastor friend pull me aside speaking of that "Holy Holy Holy" that we just sang a few minutes ago as well. He said he likes to think about it as if each holy is a deeper and deeper revelation of the Holiness of God. Holy is God, holy is God, holy is God, each a different dimension of this one that we call upon. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory. And Isaiah, upon experiencing this scene, his first response is not "this is amazing." His first response is "Woe is me. My lips are unclean." It's almost as if he knows what the Lord is about to instruct him with, call him to, and so he almost wants to disqualify himself before he is asked. "My lips are unclean." I don't know about you, but when somebody calls to schedule, you know, a zoom or texts me to schedule a zoom or a phone call, and I have a feeling they're going to ask me to do something, I preemptively strike, right. "I'm happy to talk to you on the phone, but I want you to know I have a really busy couple months coming up, right. I'm happy to talk to you about that possibility, but, boy oh boy, has my schedule filled up, and have I overcommitted myself," right? Isaiah is doing something like that right here. "My lips are unclean," and the Lord doesn't abide it, not for a second. The seraphs go over. They take a call with tongs. They bring it from the altar and touch his lips, and they are made clean, and spoken, he is spoken to and assured that his lips are exactly the sort of lips that can be the lips of a prophet. The Lord immediately addresses his concerns about his ability even before the question is asked, and then right as he hears the word that his sins have been blotted out and the guilt has departed from him, he says, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying 'whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'" Interesting. Whom shall the Lord send, but not just for the Lord but for all creation.

There's something I admire about Isaiah. He says yes before he knows what the actual calling is. Isaiah says yes. Then God gives him the word. A lot of us want to know the context of our call before we decide whether we are going to respond in the affirmative to it or not. We want to know the shape that it will take. We're in the midst of nominating season right now. We're almost done. We have a full class, almost a full class of Elders and a full class of Deacons, right. If you've served on a nominating committee before, then you know how tenuous it can be when you dial that phone number, and you're waiting for the other person to pick up on the other end

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of the line, because sometimes those conversations get very long with lots of questions, right? “How long are session meetings?” This is one we hear often now. “I heard they're longer now that you're here.” “I don't know. I wasn't here before, sometimes they're an hour, sometimes they're three. I don't know.” “What about committee responsibilities? What about this and what about that?” Good questions, faithful questions, important questions for some before they make commitments to serve, right. But then there are other calls that are much easier. I have to tell you about an experience I had this past week. I happened to be in here early on Friday. Finished up my workout at Apex and came over here and was grabbing coffee and doing some things, and one of our potential deacons walked in the lobby of the Jones building and walked right past me. And as they were making their way back, I said, “Hey, has anybody called you yet to come and be a deacon.” They said, “No, not yet.” And I stepped out from behind the glass by Marsha's desk there, and I said “May I ask you to entertain the call to serve the Lord as a deacon?” And this person said yes, and I said “So I can ask you?” “Yes.” And then we played who's on first for about three seconds, and I said, “Well, I'd like to ask you.” And she said, “I'm saying yes.” I said, “You don't want to know how long the meetings are or how often they are?” “No.” “The responsibilities you have?” “No.” “How about I explain it to you anyways. There's these four things that deacons do, right?” The yes was immediate, right. Some of us, myself included, we need all the details before we respond to the call.

Others... Isaiah doesn't actually need all of those. He simply needs to know that the Lord is calling him. My assumption is he knows the Lord's going to take care of what that calling looks like. Some of us want the details. Others of us, like the prophet Isaiah, are able to respond immediately. For Isaiah's sake I'm glad he didn't ask too many questions. I'm glad he didn't need the picture painted fully for him, because his calling is going to be a difficult one. If you read verses 9 through 13, you will read the word that God gives to him to prophesy, and it is not an easy word. It is a word of judgment upon the nation and a word of conviction and it is one he is called to carry. It is such a difficult word that those who study Isaiah are able to differentiate where the original word that was given to him in 17, or excuse me, 742 BCE when that original word was added to. It turns out that a couple of hundred years later when second Isaiah was written and then third Isaiah, one of the editors went back to this portion of chapter 6 of Isaiah. And if you read it in the NRSV, you'll see there's this parenthetical put at the very end of verse 13. I'll leave you to it, but basically there's a word of hope interjected at the end of the prophecy, because it is such a difficult one.

And I wonder if Isaiah would have known exactly what the content of his calling was going to be, would he have actually said yes. So many times in our lives, we navigate situations that we have felt called to, and they are much more difficult than we could have imagined they would be. And I wonder if you're like me, when we get through or we're in the midst of one of those seasons, we...you might say to yourself, “If I knew what God was calling me to, if I knew the content of this calling, if I knew what I was going to have to experience, I wouldn't have said yes.” And yet the calling of Isaiah is so necessary. God desires, God doesn't need, but God desires prophets and disciples in the world to carry the message of God there and here. And so when he has been prepared with clean lips and a pure heart, it is then that Isaiah hears the voice

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of God speaking, saying “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And immediately he says, “Here I am. Send me.”

We find ourselves in a season of transition, social and political. As a community we find ourselves in that place. And as I reflected on what it means to be called by God in this time, there was a prayer that was drawn back to my attention. It’s one written by Walter Bruggemann. I want to read it as a communal prayer this day before we move to the conclusion of the sermon.

It’s entitled Kingdoms Rage and We are Called. Hear these words of Walter Bruggemann.

Kingdoms rage;

Empires tremble;

Cities totter.

You speak assurance;

You designate human agents;

You say, “This is my beloved son”;

You say, “This is my anointed.”

*Right in the middle of all the chaos,
you designate human agents who do your will.*

And we are not sure;

*We would rather it were you,
directly,*

straight on and visible.

*But you stay hidden in your holy splendor,
and we are left with human agents
about whom we are never sure.*

*So we name Jesus, “son of David”;
so human and frail, even if kicked upstairs;
so vulnerable, even if transformed in song and creed.*

And then, in a flash, it may dawn on us:

You call and designate people like us, your agents.

Kingdoms rage ... and we are called.

Empires tremble ... and we are designated.

Cities totter ... and we are summoned ..., anxious, your people.

like the first David, like the second David ...us, vulnerable, frail, anxious, your people.

....

And if the calling is to move into community, then the calling is also for each of us. And it struck me this week that, as Isaiah is careful to name when this prophetic message comes to him in the year King Uzziah died, it strikes me that each of us finds ourselves in a particular year of our own living right now. Would that we could hear God's call. So allow me, if you will, to rephrase the beginning of our scripture this day.

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In the year I changed jobs, in the year I got married, in the year I quit drinking, in the year I went to therapy, in the year I started daily devotional practice, in the year my son died, in the year I recommitted to worship, in the year I got fired, in the year my marriage fell apart, in the year I started exercising, in the year I filed for divorce, in the year I got that new job, in the year I chose my college, in the year President Joseph Biden's term came to an end, in the year President Donald Trump was reelected, might we say together as the prophet did, "I saw the Lord. In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord," the prophet said. In the midst of transition and turmoil, I saw the Lord. In the midst of difficulty, I saw the Lord. In the midst of provision I saw the Lord.

What strikes me about this text is that each of us find ourselves in a particular time in our journeys of faith and in our lives, and it is in that particular time and space that we are promised we would see the Lord. Would that we might be open to the calling of God, unsure as we might be of what it will look like for us and what being a prophet might be in the days and weeks and months and years ahead. Would that we might be reassured that the voice of God will come, and that that voice will ask, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

Would that we as a people personally and communally might say, "Here we are. Send us."

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all.
Amen.