

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

A Day with Isaiah

Sermon Reflection Notes

After the reigns of David and Solomon, the kingdom of Israel divided into two countries. The northern kingdom retained the ancient name Israel, and was the larger nation with a succession of different families in power. Judah, to the south, was a smaller kingdom ruled by David's descendants in Jerusalem.

The earliest four "writing" prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah) were relative contemporaries, living in the middle to late eight century BCE, in different regions of these two countries. The text, *Isaiah 6:1-13*, could possibly be dated 742 BCE. That year was about 22 years before the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel. Isaiah was the only one of these four prophets who made his home in Jerusalem, and who enjoyed access to the Judean kings.

All four of these prophets insisted that their covenant with God and their ethical behavior were inseparable. They advocated social justice, mercy, and support for weaker neighbors. All four anticipated disaster for regimes that failed to maintain justice for their people. The book of Isaiah can be thought of as an amalgamation of three books: "1st Isaiah" (chapters 1-39) emphasized divine sovereignty and holiness, urging radical trust and faithfulness to the Lord; "2nd Isaiah" (chapters 40-55) is a collection of visions from the time of Babylonian exile; they are imagining their return home and the message is of comfort, hope, and renewal; and the third section (chapters 55-66) reflects the conditions of the exiles returning home, a return that is hard work with the temple still in ruins. Fun fact: Isaiah is quoted more in the New Testament more than any other scripture.

Isaiah's vision in the scripture this week was one of extraordinary worship. Visions are prominent in the Bible and have continued throughout church history. Visions are not of our greatness, but rather the greatness of God; not our success, but God's glory. Whether or not we approach visions with cynicism doesn't really matter. We can read them and ruminate on the mysteries of God. Isaiah's vision is not one of comfort or tranquility. Instead, God is seated on a throne where the train of God's robe is overflowing "into the lobby". Angels are flying around covering their faces so they don't unintentionally look God in the face. Angels!

We tend to think of Isaiah, like any prophet in the Bible, as a holy guy, and yet he is awestruck by the magnitude of God's glory and the depth of his own inadequacy. Isaiah cries out, "Woe is me!" because he feels so unworthy to be in God's presence. Isaiah confesses his sin, saying he has unclean lips; the words that fall from his mouth are unholy. How often do we invoke the power of God without having any idea what we are doing? Should we, as Annie Dillard suggests, be wearing crash helmets to worship? Do we dare stand in the presence of God?

And yet, we, like Isaiah, are called to see and feel how extraordinary God's grace really is. We, like Isaiah, are confronted with God's power and beauty, and like Isaiah, can truly reflect on our need to confess our plight and sin. Isaiah knew he could not speak for God, and it was that confession that led the angel to offer a physical sign of cleansing and forgiveness.

Isaiah confronts his own inadequacy and is assured of God's forgiveness. It is only then he can respond to God's call: "Here I am, send me." God tells him what he is getting into. Isaiah knows people will not listen to him. His ministry, which he must engage in, will fail—miserably. And yet...Isaiah is a reminder that success is not always about outcomes. Success for followers of the God of Isaiah is knowing that when all is said and done, we participated with God in the work of redemption and hope, with the God who is making all things beautiful and new.

Scripture

Isaiah 6:1-13 (NRSVUE)

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. ² 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. ³ And one called to another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵ 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!"

⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ 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." ⁸ 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!" ⁹ And he said, "Go and say to this people:

'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.'

¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said, "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; ¹² until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. ¹³ Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled." (The holy seed is its stump.)

Discussion Questions

1. The Bible is full of stories about people who experience visions. Retell Isaiah's vision in your own words. What other 'vision stories' do we remember from the Bible?

2. Pastor Ron talked about "thin spaces, those sacred spaces where one may sense that the distance between heaven and earth are thin, places where the terrestrial and celestial collide." Have you ever been to such a place? Did you know you were standing on holy ground in the moment? What are those places like?
3. Pastor Ron said that "perhaps sometimes we are too 'chummy' with God." What might he be suggesting?
4. Part of our communion liturgy is when the pastor calls us to "...with your people on earth and all the company of heaven we praise your name and join their unending hymn:" to which we respond..."Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest."
 - What's the connective thread from Isaiah's vision to our communion response? Do you see any other connective threads in our response?
5. Isaiah's answer to God's call— "Here I am, send me"—is one we want to emulate. We want to volunteer without hesitation. But Isaiah also knew, because God made very clear, that what he was signing up for was failure. The people would not listen. What does it mean to say "Here I am, send me" knowing that all our work will fail? What does that answer require of us before we even begin?

Closing Prayer

Holy God, in ancient times when kings led with self-interest, brutality, and with corruption, you called Isaiah and the other prophets to speak honestly about the reality of oppression. You called your prophets to announce that you will have the final word toward judgment, and justice, and care for those who are being trampled as being irrelevant. In our baptism, you continue to call us to be your faithful witnesses.

And so, on this day, we pray that you will touch our lives with your holy fire, that we might be the church, the body of Christ. Give us courage to trust that you will lead us to speak your words of truth. Help us to say, "Here I am, Lord," so that we, your church, may name with joy and passion the name of Jesus over our lives. Amen.

"Here I am, Lord. Send me."