

“A VERY BAD YEAR”

ISAIAH 6:1-13

FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC

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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. ²Seraphs 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. ³And one called to another and said:

‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.’

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And 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. ⁷The 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.’ ⁸Then 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 Word of the Lord. Let us pray: sear our hearts God, cleanse us in order that we may hear your Word, and hearing your Word, may pursue your will. Amen.

Once upon a time, that’s how Isaiah may as well begin, or perhaps “A long time ago, in a place far, far away.” The practical effect is the same, a generic signifier to let us know that whatever is about to happen happened in some distant past, in a place far removed from this one, where once there had been a King named Uzziah, well, until he died. “King Uzziah,” bears no notoriety, recalls no scandals. The details of his reign: when, where, over whom seem inconsequential. We hear those opening lines of Isaiah six, and we’re set up for a nice little story, an innocuous legend of little consequence to modern life.

But for Isaiah and his readers “In the year King Uzziah died” held enormous significance. Consider as a parallel, “In the year the towers fell.” We remember with nostalgia the prosperous “before”—walking right up to the gate of the airline, fewer lines, fewer lists—and the “after”—fear, zealous nationalism, a country in mourning

fundamentally changed. Stories in the shadow of the towers bear weight. We may not remember it, but stories about the King do too.

Uzziah reigned over Judah for forty years, from 782-742BCE. He held sway over a powerful military, a prospering economy, and a devout people. He set out to restore the splendors of the Davidic Kingship. Then he died, and everything changed.

There was a “before”—peace, prosperity, leadership—and an “after”—a pursuing Assyrian army, desecrated sacred sites, an economy and its people on their knees.

Isaiah means to jar us to attention. His wild prophetic call: the time and place of it, your reaction to it, matters. This is a story in a time of chaos, in a land overcome by fear, for a people unable to see God. This is a story for us. And I’m going to tell you upfront, things get a bit crazy.

“In the year Uzziah died,” Isaiah writes, “I saw the Lord.” Not in a time of peace, not on a lovely shore; it was *that* year. In the midst of fear and change Isaiah finds himself enraptured, taken from his seat in the Temple to the heart of the divine throne room. Seraphs, which by the way are not the lovely angelic figures, but rather dragonish snakes with six wings too many, are flying above him, their beating pinions veiling their odd bodies. They are crying out from each corner, echoing over one another in a brilliant cacophony, quite the opposite of our harmonious hymn, *Holy, holy, holy is the lord of hosts; the whole earth his full of his glory.*

This, my friends, is not the heavenly utopia I usually imagine: a quartet of angels sweetly singing the descant to the hymn Luther wrote, AC at 71, streets of understated gold. Scripture disrupts our pastoral fairy scene, offering instead a torrent of chaos. The voice of the seraphim become so overwhelming that the very foundation on which Isaiah stands begins to quake from deep within, and from the cracks smoke floods the room obscuring Isaiah’s senses, setting us all on edge.

This divine encounter is no fairy tale. Things are heating up.

I don’t know if you remember the days before refrigerators magically began creating and dispensing ice, but I do, and I remember in particular that one tray of ice cubes lodged in the back of my parents’ freezer that was absolutely unmeltable. Every freezer seemed to have at least one unmeetable tray. Perhaps once it was pliant but then it developed a layer of frost which refroze and no matter how much hot water you ran over it, no matter how you tried to pry and pull the tray, well, you came to realize that when the world

ended this would be the one thing that signaled to future civilizations that humans almost had it all.

I am a cradle Presbyterian, which means I am a part of the deeply frozen chosen. That's what they call us Presbyterians, we who are nervous at too much emotion, too many rhythms, too much feeling in worship. The closest I have come to ecstatic worship is once when I clapped after Youth Sunday. I closed my eyes during a song once too, but that was in Montreat and we all deserve a pass there.

This text sets me on edge because I identify with that tray of ice cubes, but Isaiah sets before me a God who demands the impossible: affecting a deep thaw, a radical re-orientation, an all out transformation. This text demands that I look on God, and consider whether I'm in the throne room, in the world, or stuck unbending in the back of the church freezer.

Isaiah lays out an uncomfortable truth: you cannot encounter God without being changed.

Isaiah had shown up. I imagine he expected a nice Torah portion, a good message, a manageable dose of guilt and an uplifting resolution. But then the foundations began to rock, dragons appeared, and the hem of the Divine robe filled the room. Isaiah finally *saw* God, encountered God.

And he began to thaw. The frost melted away away as he bent his ear toward the howling sound. His knees cracked as the foundation erupted and hot smoke filled his nostrils. Perhaps like me Isaiah had been expecting the other throne room, the guided one with AC and free HBO. That's not what he got. This God, aloft on the throne, wholly other, inspired holy fear.

This is the God we forget, or about whom we'd rather not think.

The "frozen chosen" shy away from characterizing God as fearful, hoping to separate ourselves from generations of crazies with their lakes of fire, hoping that by ignoring God's righteousness we can avoid confronting our own failures. We have made God to look like us: a jovial parent who requires nothing, expects nothing, justifies everything.

Set yourself in the scene once more. Isaiah does not react with jubilant adoration when he finds himself in the presence of God. He does not fall to his knees in a state of passive zen. He understands, perhaps for the first time, his own inadequacy. Seeing God's greatness, his holiness, Isaiah finally sees himself.

And he is unspooled. All of his confidence, all of his expectations melt away. “Woe is me!” he cries, “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.”

This is real life Wayne’s World. Isaiah is not worthy to stand in God’s presence, and neither are we. Not a stitch, not an inch of him is prepared for the divine encounter.

It sounds like bad news but I promise it’s not. If we’re going to follow God out there, we must first come to understand this here: there is a sinfulness in us that we cannot undo. It jeopardizes us, and it leaves a trace in all of our living. It separates us from God, separates us from the goodness for which we were created. It’s not some peccadillo, some little white lie. Our darkness runs deep, and it has darkened God’s creation. Our darkness has set the world on edge, left God’s people languishing in poverty, stuck in cycles of abuse and addiction, condemned by a church whose only job is welcome. There’s no way around it. The failure requires correction, and that, believe it or not, is where the good news comes in.

God, altogether greater than us, altogether holier than us, in no way is obligated to fix the mess we’ve made of his creation, reaches out. For Isaiah that means a seraph pulls a live coal from a red hot fire and with tongs sears his mouth. We’ve enshrined it here in our stained glass: the tongs, the coal, the fire. It is a picture of love commingling with righteousness, the healing hand reaching across the chasm. It is painful, but change often is.

“There is a crack in everything,” sang Leonard Cohen, “that’s how the light gets in.” In the year King Uzziah died God came to a broken man in a broken time and a broken world. So too does God come to us.

Each week we stand among one another and confess our sin. It is one of the most unique features of our worship, meant to begin the thaw. We announce that we are not in control. We confess systems of racism in which we wittingly and unwittingly participate, economics of injustice into which we invest, simple meanness that dictates our action. We acknowledge our brokenness and our contribution to the world’s brokenness.

And God begins the thaw. “your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Believe the good news: the good news of Jesus Christ, the good news of the hot coal. You are forgiven. We cannot heal ourselves, we cannot melt our hearts, change our own lives, but God can. And God does!

But even that's not all. We do not confess, we do not experience the grace-filled thaw so that we can jump back into the ice-tray till next week, shaken only to be calcified once again.

"Who will go for us?" God calls, "And whom shall I send?" *hin'ni*, Isaiah responds, "Here am I; send me." It is perhaps one of the most rich verbs in the Hebrew language, a startling verb signifying a turning point, just like Old King Uzziah's death. Something is about to change. The year King Uzziah died is the year faithful Isaiah finally comes alive.

Isaiah found himself in the divine throne room only to be thrown out into world. He was not given eyes to see so that he could go on ignoring the folks around him, he was not tasked with the divine message so that he could stay frozen in calcified adoration. The hot coal thawed his heart, and in it he found his purpose.

Hear, O Church, Isaiah's call! The divine voice echoes from that room to this sacred space.

Change is a crazy-making thing. Few of us want it. But all of us need it. Our trays, our little boxes, our ideology and policy and preferences, our self-justifying worship, our obsession with a world of empty promises will be stirred and shaken, melted and made new when finally we come to this place ready to encounter the living God who is calling us beyond ourselves to a people in great need!

First we recognize our failure: Too often when we speak of God we are speaking only of glorified versions of ourselves. We ask for God but resist God. We project our ideals, our best selves, our comfort, and name them divine. That's what Israel was doing, that's what Isaiah was doing. *But that is not our God, thanks be thanks be to God!*

How might we know? If God looks like you, good faithful church, you better look again. If God sounds like you, lovely choirs, you best retune your ear. If God charms you, a good luck sigil, a rallying cry, you may want to open your eyes for the divine throne. If God shares your opinions, your hates, your desires, your prejudices, well...I hate to tell you but you're looking in a mirror, not toward the heavens.

Now don't you worry. I'm not suggesting we start bringing in snake handlers or passing the peace. I don't want you to go crazy clapping every time you catch the Spirit. What I'm suggesting is that you allow God to open you to the thaw. I'm suggesting you come to this place willing to risk your way of life, to risk being changed and transformed, that you come to this place with an open heart and your walking shoes on.

There is a throne in the heart of the city, a voice crying out for right worship, right living, for justice in our dealings with one another, in the way we spend money, in our politics and governance. That voice requires a second, an human echo: *whom shall I send?*

The answer is you. And me. We are thawed out, stirred up, so that we can become a part of the recreation.

It's a fairy tale, but it's deadly serious. In the year of Uzziah's death and in this year, the year of another and another and another school shooting, the year of an unimaginably divided society, of civil rights abuses, of lost children, of geopolitical unrest it is our task to confront our failures, our contributions to the bad news, and to be transformed. It is our task to be the Good News to the poor, the marginalized, the forgotten, in the midst of a very bad year. That is the good news of the Gospel, the good news of the incarnation, the Good News that stretches from the Exodus to Uzziah, until it reaches our lips and we proclaim now and forever, "Here I am. Send me."

And though it is not a diet we might choose, and though we may wish we hand't shown up for this particular fairy tale, there is nothing we can do but receive the purification. It will shake us to our very foundation, this voice, this hot-coal, it will change what you believe and how you act and how you see the world, but in the shaking it will locate you. Unaware that we were lost, we will be found, found in the throne room, found in the terror, found in the midst of God's great creation. Who will go? And whom shall God send?

—A. A. Stuckey