

“ISAIAH & THE HOT COAL DIET”

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. **Thanks be to God.***

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, where once there had been a King named Uzziah. The first verse of Isaiah six seems about as interesting as the Chronicles text Rosemary read earlier. “King Uzziah,” in our minds, bears no notoriety, recalls no scandals. The details of his reign: when, where, over whom seem inconsequential. We hear those opening lines of the text, 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 “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 death of a 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, a crumbling economy, and a worn-down people.

By summoning Uzziah, Isaiah means to call us to attention. The time and place of Isaiah’s call narrative matters. It is a summons in a time of chaos, in a land overcome by fear, for a people unable to see God. Which means it’s a story for us. And I’m going to tell you upfront, it gets 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 is not the heavenly utopia I imagine: a quartet of angels sweetly singing, 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, and from the cracks in the Temple floor 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 wonder if some of y’all remember the days before refrigerators magically began creating and dispensing ice? In particular I wonder if you remember that one tray of ice cubes lodged in the back of the freezer that was absolutely unmeltable. Every freezer had at least one unbending 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 pried 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, the religious sect that is best compared to *that* unmeltable tray. That's what they call us Presbyterians, *the frozen chosen*, reminding us of both our theology of election and our inability to bend at the joint — we who are nervous at too much emotion, too many rhythms, too much feeling in worship. The closest I have come to Isaiah's call story is once when I spontaneously clapped after Youth Sunday. I still remember the surprise reaction — and Lud's burning eyes at my spontaneous outburst.

This text, which when glossed reads as a comfortable story of nice divine throne rooms, sets me on edge because I identify with that tray of ice cubes, but Isaiah sets before me a God who demands the impossible: a deep thaw, a radical re-orientation, an all out transformation. This text demands that those called to Christian discipleship, to a life lived in pursuit of the living God, look on God and consider whether we're in the throne room, in the world, or stuck unbending in the back of the church freezer.

I'm gonna tell y'all. There are too many Christians these days — Presbyterian or not — who are stuck in the back of that freezer. For them, for us, Isaiah lays out an uncomfortable truth: you cannot encounter God, you cannot accept God's call, without change.

Isaiah had shown up to Temple. I imagine he, like us, 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. Which is to say that in a place you would most expected it, but in a most unexpected manner, Isaiah finally *encountered* God.

And Isaiah began to thaw. The frost melted away away as he bent his ear toward the howling. 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, inspired holy fear.

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

The “frozen chosen” — or at least the PCUSA tray — shy away from characterizations of God rooted in fear, hoping to separate ourselves from generations of wild, unruly Christians with their lakes of fire and snake-handling salvation, hoping that by not getting too worked up we might not get too worked over.

But the truth is that when we see God, we encounter God's righteousness, a righteousness that inspires holy fear. A righteousness in which we realize that all is not well in us, in the world, or even in our churches. When we truly *see* God, we see the ways in which we have missed the mark.

Generations of Christians like us, afraid of seeming to extreme or self hating have made God to look like us: a jovial parent who requires nothing, expects nothing, justifies everything. And to be clear, God is a loving parent. But God is also one who demands we turn from sin and face a call on our lives that requires something entirely new. God challenges the way we understand God, and by extension the world God creation.

God shows us the ways our thinking is disordered, our relationships are fraught, our world is caught in a web of sin...not to inspire despair or guilt, but to move us past it. To cleanse us so that we can, finally, get to work.

Set yourself in the scene once more. Isaiah does not react to the revelation with jubilant adoration. 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, God's 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. But God bridges the gap. God meets Isaiah in his guilt, but God doesn't leave him there. God prepares him, equips him, and moves him along.

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 who we are in this place, because the world won't tell us the truth: there is a sinfulness in us and in our communities 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 separates us from one another. It's not some peccadillo, some little white lie. The darkness runs deep, and it has darkened God's creation. Our darkness, our complicity with systems of injustice, our astonishing capacity to forgive in ourselves what we judge in one another, 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, 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. It is a picture of love commingling with righteousness, the healing hand reaching across the chasm. It is painful, but change often is.

In the year King Uzziah died God came to a broken man in a broken time and a broken world. So too God comes to us. Even now.

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 and empower us to hear a new word to inspire our living. 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 then God twists us out of our little trays, liberating us for what's next: "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!

"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 — for good. Isaiah doesn't experience the thaw only jump back into the ice-tray till next week, shaken only to be calcified once again.

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.

Do you hear, Westminster, Isaiah's call? The divine voice echoes from that room to this sacred space. It calls you. It calls me. And it requires change.

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 world in great need!

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 (though you can if you want). 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 mind, 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: *here I am*.

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 unjustifiable shooting, the year of an calcified and divided society, of civil rights abuses, 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 become the Good News to the poor, the marginalized, the forgotten, and the grieving. 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, "Send me."

And though it is not a diet we might choose, and though we may wish we hadn'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