

Isaiah

Second in the Advent Annunciations Series

by

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II Isaiah 6:1-8; 7:13-14

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!”

⁶Then 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!”

In the verses that follow, Isaiah is given a harsh word of judgement to correct the peoples’ ways, and then when the new King Ahaz ascends the throne Isaiah plants this amazing seed of hope:

¹³Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

I think it's fair to say that we find in the Book of Isaiah our favorite Christmas prophet. What would the season of Advent be without hearing these familiar and hope-filled refrains:

*They shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness –
on them light has shined...*

*For a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon
his shoulder and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God...
a voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.¹*

So embedded in our tradition and, I believe, in the very psyche of our faith, I am not sure how we would prepare our spiritual selves for Christmas without these precious words of Isaiah lighting the way. Nevertheless, we often make our journey through the Advent season forgetting something critically important about the prophet's own personal story.

Our reading for today begins with that call story, when God interrupted Isaiah's life with a word from above offering a new vocation. We hear Isaiah's hesitancy when God first called. "Woe is me! I am lost," he initially retorted to the glorious interruption from God. "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." In a

¹ Is 2:4; 9:2,6; 40:1,3

word, Isaiah is saying: I am not worthy. The words I speak betray my sin. I cannot escape the unsuitable company I keep. I am filled with guilt and thereby cannot even imagine being the spokesperson for the Lord of Hosts.

It's kind of hard to believe that the prophet we have come to depend on at this time of the year, the prophet we count on to shed light into our darkness, and the prophet who is always giving us hope for the future at first had no interest in the job. The prophet who even gave Jesus his very first sermon text about bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight for the blind and letting the oppressed go free... began his prophetic career by saying, "No, God, I don't think so – I am sinful, unworthy, and not up to the task of speaking on your behalf."

Remembering a little bit about Isaiah's historic context helps us understand his initial hesitancy as well as his contemporary relevance for us today. Before God issues this call to Isaiah, the first five chapters of the book lay out the existential and spiritual problems of the Judeans in the eighth century before the birth of Jesus. It is a grim picture, and sadly, sounds like a time not unlike our time. The political leaders are corrupt. The Bible calls them "rebels and friends of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend..." the poor or support their cause. The beginning of Isaiah details the rich have gotten richer and the poor have gotten poorer. The wealthy acquire more and more of the land until they live alone with little thought to those who have no place to live. ²

It is as if Isaiah points out that, while the stock market is soaring, one in four children lives with food insecurity in America. Greed has led to injustice, and concern for the common good has been devoured by individual pursuits and selfish desire for more wealth. The Biblical prophet asks: what is the cause of this dismal picture? The people have

² Is 1:23; 5:8

forgotten their God and forsaken the just and compassionate ways of the Lord. So at this very moment when there is a change in earthly, political leadership, the Lord of Hosts breaks into human history. “In the year King Uzziah died,” Isaiah has this incredible vision. The presence of the Lord is so magnificent, that the hem of God’s robe overflows the Temple, while winged seraphs sing “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

In the midst of great national turmoil, at the juncture of a change in leadership, God pulls back the curtain between heaven and earth just far enough for the hesitant prophet to feel insecure about joining God’s communications team. When Isaiah has a glimpse of God, he sees himself, as well as the people, for what we really are: sinful and having fallen short of the glory of God. We all know what it is like to feel unworthy and not quite up to a holy task. But God never rejects us; God never issues a call and then takes “no” for an answer.



Rather, God sends one of those winged seraphs with a burning coal and touches the lips of Isaiah so that he can then speak on behalf of the Lord of Hosts. We see in Marc Chagall's famous painting, that burning coal cleanses the unclean lips of Isaiah so that he can give those people who had become mired in greed and corruption a new vision. It is a vision emanating from the swirling mystery of God's presence overflowing the canvas as it overflows the Temple into the world of God's people. Isaiah will speak a divine word to encourage them to forsake their sinful ways and return to the Lord, to recommit themselves to God's ways of peace and justice. Isaiah gives us this same vision, to live toward a life as God intends it for all of God's children – abundant life, with equity, justice, and peace; a vision meant to inspire us to serve one another, and carry us into the future with hope for a brighter tomorrow.

A few years ago, closer to the beginning of the Syrian Refugee crisis a woman named Cristal Logothetis opened herself to the plight of human suffering and she had a vision. Cristal is a mother and a businesswoman in California who saw an image of a little three-year-old Syrian refugee whose body washed up on the shore in Greece. She wanted to do something, as many of us have wanted to alleviate the suffering of so many people who have been displaced by violence and poverty. Out of sheer maternal empathy something stirred her imagination in the simplest of ways. Watching the news, she saw so many refugees carrying their children in their arms, and as a Mom, she could not imagine making their kind of journey carrying a small child the whole way. She had in-laws in Greece, so she started a campaign to collect baby carriers for refugees making the long, dangerous, desperate, hopeful trek to freedom.

Initially she hoped to collect a hundred carriers to send to one island in Greece, but soon over thirty-five hundred had been donated and delivered to refugee families by volunteers, mostly moms themselves, waiting on the shores and in harbors of Greece and Turkey.

Sometimes they had only a few minutes to teach the refugees how to use the carriers before the families had to move on. Out of an initial despair for a world on edge an amazing non-profit was formed and you know what its name is? Carry the Future.

Today, just five years later, Carry the Future has sixty staff volunteers, and fifty-five hundred global volunteers working on four continents for Emergency Response, Community Development and a Welcome Baby program for the essentials a refugee family needs for a small child – because “a child’s safety and future always comes first.”³

That is what Isaiah was asked by God to do – to inspire the people to carry the future, to carry the future with compassion, to carry the future in hope, and to remember that the future was carried by God on the promise of a child. That’s what Isaiah’s vision is intended to do for us – in these dark days of Advent, in a fraught transition of political power, in the worst months of a pandemic, while we not only wait for – but also can live toward a brighter tomorrow. For how did the prophet Isaiah come to say it?

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

God with us – and enlisting us to carry the future with compassion and with hope.

AMEN.

³ carrythefuture.org