

Sunday May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Trinity

Isaiah 6:1-8

“What Spirit Resides in You?”

A defendant was on trial for murder. There was strong evidence indicating guilt, but there was no corpse. In the defense's closing statement, the lawyer, knowing that his client would probably be convicted, resorted to a trick: "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you all," the lawyer said as he looked at his watch. "Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case, will walk into this courtroom." He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked on eagerly.

A minute passed. Nothing happened. Finally, the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked on with anticipation. I therefore put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist that you return a verdict of not guilty." The jury, clearly confused, retired to deliberate. A few minutes later, the jury returned and pronounced a verdict of guilty. "But how?" inquired the lawyer. "You must have had some doubt, I saw all of you stare at the door." The jury foreman replied: "Oh, we looked, but your client didn't." source: <http://www.jokebuddha.com/Doubt#ixzz5FUIPT7wn>

I have come to understand more and more, that one thing most people want more than anything in this world is certainty. Most people want to know that the ground they are standing on will not shift. The problem is, as we all know deep in our hearts, there is little certainty in this life. That hasn't stopped many people, some well-meaning ones included, to try and promote certainty; at least as they define it. Politicians are adept at this exercise, claiming to know with certainty what is best for us.

In terms of faith, Christian or otherwise, the desire for certainty leads to what we might call: fundamentalism, rigidity, dogmatism; and often these positions are based on poor scholarship and theology. This later point occurs because if we cannot fit a concept, or idea, into our ridged framework, it must be jettisoned or interpreted to fit the framework. Religious leaders who promise certainty are quite popular, because believing something is certain is easy on us.

Thomas Moore uses a musical analogy to describe the nature of fundamentalism. *If you go to a piano and strike a low C rather hard, you will hear, whether you know it or not, a whole series of tones. You hear the “fundamental” note clearly, but it would sound very strange if it didn't also include its overtones – C's and G's and E's and even B-flat.*

Jake Hepner writes, “In other words, fundamentalism always narrows the focus, causing one to think simplistically about whatever concept one is contemplating. There are reasons why people become fundamentalists. First, the mind always looks for a clear-cut, rational, and summary meaning for everything it encounters. It is uncomfortable with ambiguities. And second, our insecurities call for foundational certainties that we can use as a defense against the fears related to: choice, responsibility, and change.

Once you become a true fundamentalist you can basically stop thinking – someone has done that for you. And you can press all the experiences of life into pre-cast molds. You don't expect to learn or experience anything new.

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But our souls crave more than fundamental facts and cookie-cutter molds. They thirst for nuances and overtones, for imagination and heart. Our souls look for meaning behind stories and allusions to the secrets that lie hidden beneath the factual rubble they get covered with. Our souls know instinctively that there is more to reality than statistical data and foolproof boxes in which to store all our experiences.

The failure of fundamentalism then, in any context, is that it defines truth and life in terms of brittle facts and singular meaning, leaving little room to explore and embrace the ambiguities that surround us. In the end it leaves us with not much to talk about except the weather and a rehearsal of our limited list of facts. Fundamentalism may give birth to passion, but it is incapable of nurturing the deepest needs of our souls.” (Jack Heppner, Edgework-06/15/2009)

If I had a nickel every time someone said to me, “Just tell me what to believe”. Frankly, I don’t want that responsibility. I would rather present thoughts, concepts, or theology for your consideration. I am determined to see folks put forth some effort to learn, wrestle with ideas, or examine sacred texts in appropriately scholarly ways. Just because someone has a degree, or a pulpit, or a radio or television show, does not mean they are correct.

In Christian circles, questions about interpretation, cultural biases, historical meaning, and a host of other influences on the bible, are rejected by many in the name of certainty. Uncertainty, as we know, breeds doubt, and doubt can frighten us; when in fact, doubt can often lead to new growth, a deeper understanding, and a renewed faith.

Our Old Testament lesson today comes at a time of great uncertainty. It is a passage where we have a pretty good idea of when it happened. Uzziah, the ancient king of Judah, died in 740 or 739 BC depending on how the years are calculated.

Uzziah became king at the ripe old age of age of 16, and he reigned for 52 years. In the early part of his reign, Uzziah was heavily influenced by a prophet Zechariah, (not the same one who wrote the book of Zechariah) and he was faithful to God. 2 Kings 15:3 reads that Uzziah “did that which was right in the eyes of God”. For all intents and purposes, at least early on, Uzziah was a good king.

Beyond his obedience to God, Uzziah made many improvements to the military defenses of Jerusalem, and according to 2 Chronicles 26, his armies defeated the Philistines and Arabians and received tributes from the Ammonites. That means he controlled the Ammonites who were at the mercy of Uzziah and paid to keep the peace. Uzziah was a vigorous, and capable ruler, who was known even in Egypt. (2 Chron. 26:8-14)

However, Uzziah’s pride got the best of him. As his reign wore on, he began to take more and more liberties thinking he could do whatever he wanted, and this led to his eventual downfall. In a violation of the Law of Moses, Uzziah entered the Temple, and burned incense on the altar of incense. Although he sought to honour God, he trespassed into forbidden territory. You see, the burning of incense was restricted exclusively to the priests, or descendants of Aaron.

Azariah the high priest, was so angry, he confronted the king with a group of eighty priests. As punishment, God struck Uzziah immediately with leprosy, and he was forced, do to his uncleanness, to flee the temple and live the remainder of his life in isolation. The government, seeing no other choice, handed the throne over to Uzziah's son Jotham, who was not the man his father was. Jotham was reckless with his faith and plunged the kingdom into uncertainty.

So, this is where we find ourselves when Isaiah goes into the temple to pray. Isaiah is overcome by uncertainty. As a prophet attuned to the nation of Judah, and with God, he senses the wind shifting. What will come of the nation of Judah, and the beloved city of Jerusalem, now that Uzziah has died? Uncertainty reigns in Isaiah's heart, but he simply represents how the entire nation feels. Everyone is fretting. Everyone wants a firm place to plant their feet.

If uncertainty is a problem for us as individuals, imagine what happens when it becomes a collective experience. I know how Isaiah feels, and the people of Judah. I look around me and I can feel the uncertainty. It seems to be pervading every nook and cranny of life. And there is plenty of causes for this feeling. We are at the climax of a provincial election, and we have no idea what our neighbours to the south are up to in terms of foreign policy.

We are struggling to know who to believe, and who to trust. Isaiah does the right thing. He takes his uncertainty, and the uncertainty of the nation, and he goes to God in prayer. What happens next, and what forms our lesson for today, can only be described inadequately as "Wow!" Even the words of the prophet do not seem to do justice to what he experienced. Isaiah has, a vision. A jaw dropping, knock your socks off vision.

Isaiah sees God sitting on a throne, high and lifted. There is no reference made here to Isaiah gazing at God's face. Most Hebrew people believed that upon seeing God's face, a person would immediately die. The hem of God's robe is so vast that it fills the entire temple. The whole temple is filled with smoke, indicating continual burning of incense.

The smoke also obscures the scene, adding to the mystery and otherworldliness. Attending to God are seraphs, a type of angelic being. They each had six wings. Two they used to cover their faces, two to cover their feet, and two on which to fly. The imagery here is significant. The placement of their wings is out of respect for God's holiness. God is so holy that they dare not gaze upon him.

And feet were considered the most unclean part of someone, so they too were covered. Then we are told that the seraphs, called to one another repeatedly, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is filled with his glory." Their voices shook the pivots, which unfortunately, no one knows what the Hebrew word for pivot means. Suffice it to say, their voices caused vibrations to emanate throughout the temple.

Not only is the scene jaw dropping, but the word offered repeatedly "holy", instills a further dimension of how powerful this scene is. We have lost any sense of what "holy" means. The respect for sacredness has been lost to us. The word holy is used in our common parlance as an adjective, often as an exclamation point. We say, "holy –!" You can fill in the blanks. Rarely, do we ever, find ourselves stopped in our tracks, and brought to our knees by the sacred.

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But Isaiah was. This scene, this experience, wrecked him. He knew what was before him, and his sense of unworthiness washed over him. A similar event takes place in Luke 5, when Jesus calls Peter. After catching so many fish his nets begin to break, Peter falls on his knees and asks Jesus to depart from him because he is a sinful man. Isaiah said, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Isaiah understands in this glorious scene of God on a throne, incense burning, seraphs flying and calling out, his is like a blot, a stain on this scene of holiness. He knows he shouldn’t be there, at least in the state he is in. Furthermore, he knows there is absolutely nothing he can do to make himself acceptable to be there. Isaiah needs someone else to cleanse him, to make him worthy. So, what happens?

One of the seraphs, flies over to the altar, and retrieves a hot coal from the altar with a pair of tongs, and flies over to touch Isaiah’s lips, thus cleansing him. The result of this touching with a hot coal is forgiveness. Isaiah is now ready, but ready for what? Let me state for the record that this passage is not a passage about being called to ministry. Isaiah was already a prophet before his vision experience.

What this is, is something else. Something every faithful servant of God needs. We are all called but we also need to be sent or commissioned. A call is a setting aside, but a setting aside for what? Isaiah was a prophet, but what was his purpose? So, God asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Notice the use of the word “us” here. This being Trinity Sunday, scholars like to point out that maybe, implied here, is the Trinity.

Think of Isaiah vision as akin to what a minister experience. We complete our training in seminary, because we believe God has called us to this vocation. But all the preparation and obedience to the call is empty until we are directed, or sent somewhere, to someone, to live out our calling.

And as a good Baptist who believes in the “priesthood of all believers”, I know we all are called, but we are also all sent or commissioned. And that commissioning can be as varied as there are people. A commissioning that infuses our work, our relationships, our recreation, with God given purpose. In Jesus’ words, we are to be “salt and light”.

Can I suggest that Isaiah’s encounter with God brought him a new intimacy with God? Being in such proximity with the holiness of God, God’s concerns became Isaiah’s concerns. In such intimacy with God, the things that break God’s heart, breaks our hearts. We are therefore sent, as Isaiah was sent, out into the world, to meet head on the suffering of the world. The uncertainty of the world.

No wonder Paul wrote: *“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own but by the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”*

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*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” (Romans 8:18-23)*

Paul is right. The world does groan, and we groan too. We long for something better, something more certain. But are we aware of what it will take to move the world to something better? Tony Campolo tells of a time, a young man was dragged into his office and forced into a chair by his very angry father. The father was very upset about how his son’s life was going but not in the way you might think. The father said this...

“I sent him to college to get a good education, to make something of himself, and people like you got his head turned around. Look at him now. He’s doing mission work. He’s out on the streets with pimps and prostitutes and drug pushers. He’s giving away his money to poor old ladies. He is living like a pauper and all he cares about is reaching out to the losers of the world.” Then the kicker as the father said, “Don’t get me wrong, Campolo, I don’t mind being Christian-up to a point!” (Stories to feed Your Soul, p. 159)

That’s the problem isn’t it. Aren’t we all willing and able to be Christian-up to a point? Isaiah’s vision in the temple was a truly marvelous gift, but it was necessary to move Isaiah beyond the point he had already reached. God wanted him to take another step. To go and take a message to Judah and it was not the nicest message to receive, if you read further on in the passage. In a time of great uncertainty, and more to come, how was Isaiah able to move ahead?

Simply put, he had encountered the one in which there is absolute certainty. Kings may come and go, but God is still ruler of the earth. How does the old hymn go, “On the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.” Uncertainty should never frighten us, nor force us to circle the wagons to keep out things that challenge us. Because if God is for us, who can be against us; and nothing is more certain than the King of kings.