

### **Holy Words and Holy Work**

Weeks ago, we heard God's words to David about God's plans to build more than an earthly Temple through David's descendants. David's son Solomon does build the Temple, but the shining moment does not hold. The one kingdom is divided in two, North and South. The Assyrians are now looming and will defeat the Northern kingdom of ancient Israel in a matter of years. Isaiah meets us this morning in Judah, the southern Kingdom. The first words of this chapter reference King Uzziah. Uzziah's 52-year reign was marked by relative independence and prosperity for Judah. Early on the prophet Ezekiel declared that:

Uzziah 'did what was right in the sight of the Lord.' But pride and excess brought him down. Uzziah entered the Temple, trying to offer his own sacrifices and burn his own incense on the altar. Back then, it was deadly for a King to meddle in the inner workings of God. He was [tackled] by 80 priests who tried to stop him, but it was too late. According to Josephus [an ancient historian], a huge earthquake shook the Temple, and Uzziah broke out in leprosy on his forehead. He then had to live the rest of his life in a separate house while his son Jotham took over. He was buried in the field of outside of the city, rather than in the Kings' Tomb in Jerusalem. His legacy was boiled down to four words: 'He was a leper.'...<sup>1</sup>

The death of any king tends to lead to anxiety. Uzziah's death is no different:

Uzziah's death led to a time of chaos for Judah. The neighboring Assyrians...were seizing territory, and kings who followed Uzziah would be unable to bring the kind of peace and prosperity that characterized the Uzziah years, which were probably remembered as 'the good ole days.'<sup>2</sup>

The nation now stands at a moment of transition. What will come next is unknown. [Read Isaiah 6: 1-8]

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<sup>1</sup> Becca Messman in her paper for the Well 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Messman

And now, most if not all of us are likely humming a favorite hymn—or at least one that has become a favorite since the last new hymnal was introduced in the early 90s. But before we belt out the familiar refrain, it's important to back up a few paces and listen to all that leads up to the big holy "Put me in coach" moment.

Isaiah can of course pinpoint the moment he encountered God. He helps his hearers locate this extraordinary personal moment by recalling a larger community event, the death of a king, the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. No other human being experiences the rafter-rumbling God encounter that Isaiah does, but everyone who is listening to his story can recall when they heard the news about King Uzziah. My own mother died in 2001, just months before that awful September morning when the Towers tumbled. My personal before and after moment is forever connected to our larger shared before and after. Isaiah's turning point moment lines up with a turning point moment in the life of the people, a hinge moment they too remember, the moment when the page turned abruptly, when their communal before became a communal after.

Isaiah then goes on to describe the extraordinary scene he witnessed. First, he mentions that the hem of God's robe fills the Temple. The. Hem. You may recall the grand plans for the building of the Temple with soaring ceilings and elaborate detail. It is massive and grand, and yet, if we ever fooled ourselves into thinking humans could create a building that could contain the Creator of the universe, Isaiah paints a picture where the folds of the hem, a snippet of the very edge of God's robe fills every nook and cranny.

Isaiah then tells us that he sees and hears seraphim—fiery winged creatures—singing, "Holy, holy, holy." They are declaring God's holiness responsively to one another in God's presence. It is not a matter of a solitary voice telling the others that God is holy. It is a chorus of gathered voices speaking and listening over and over again all at the same time. As you may remember, we church types call this *liturgy*, which technically means the work of the people. We do the work of worship together by speaking the words. Last I checked none of us has six wings, but we all play the role of the seraphim week in and week out in this holy space. We speak and we listen, reminding one another out loud who God is and what God promises. Worship is not a performance done by a solitary voice with excellent elocution; worship—like the life of faith—is a group

project where we sing, pray, listen, and respond as a people. Yes, it is important to hear the Word of God read and proclaimed; it is also absolutely crucial for the gathered community to speak and sing that Word, too.

This song comes naturally to the seraphim, I imagine. After all, they are in God's presence constantly. We are not in the Temple day and night. We are surrounded by a myriad of voices constantly. If I am to absorb and embody the Word of God, I need consistent practice and constant reminders. I need the liturgy; I need to be part of the chorus. That is the only way the hope, the majesty, the power of who God is and what God is about has any chance of seeping deep within my bones, my heart, my mind, and my very being. I would argue that I am not alone. I would wager that you probably need the liturgy, too.

Isaiah is mesmerized by this powerful display of worship and praise, and he is immediately humbled. In awe of the majesty surrounding him, Isaiah realizes how unworthy he is to be there. Again, this is the pattern we follow every week in worship. We sing and speak God's praises with the call to worship, and then we are confronted with how starkly different we are from the God who draws us here. We confess our sin before God and one another and we receive the assurance that God forgives us and cleanses us. The water splashing in the font is much gentler than a flaming coal, but the outcome is much the same. Yes, on our own we are unworthy to stand in God's presence, and yes, God clears the way by cleansing us to begin again.

And then Isaiah overhears the God of all asking among the celestial court, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah, like the most eager of new recruits exclaims, "Here I am! Send me!" Surrounded by the singing voices, the seraphim, and being asked by God of all to join in the work God needs help with, Isaiah throws his hand up and says, "Me! I'll do it! Pick me!"

We often end the reading with verse 8 and head out on a high note. I could use a happy, high note right about now. I'm guessing many of you could too. Tears and clenched teeth and fists have been the norm with many I've spoken with in the past few weeks and months, so a pep talk is tempting. I want to put on my best cheerleader smile, grab some pompoms and chant all the things to cheer you up and cheer you on. As I said, it's tempting. And utterly unhelpful, if not downright unfaithful. The Word of God does not always equate

with a pep talk; the Word of God does not gloss over or shield us from the challenges that come our way; the Word of God is the only Word that offers genuine hope, however.

Our reading continues with God explaining in a bit more detail what it is that Isaiah has volunteered to do with and for God. [Read Isaiah 6:9-13]

My husband Dave and I visited some dear friends in Norfolk this weekend. Drew and Ellen moved there recently from Pennsylvania for Drew to serve as the chaplain for the USS Porter, a destroyer in the US Navy. Before we got back on the road yesterday, Drew gave Dave and me a tour of the ship where he shepherds a crew of 300 sailors. These sailors come from every walk of life and from a variety of different home countries. Drew's job is similar to mine and entirely different at the same time. He preaches and prays and teaches and plans and listens and counsels. He baptizes and serves communion. He also checks in with young people who stand watch alone for four hours at a time and coaches sailors during drills, urging them to draw on their training so that they can tap the resilience they need should an attack come. And now he is preparing to tend to a flock that learned on Friday that they will be deployed for about a month, beginning December 2.

Drew recalled yesterday about how his eyes widened and his stomach lurched the first time he stepped aboard the Porter. He grew up in Georgia and attended Presbyterian College and Columbia Seminary. He has served as an associate pastor at a large Presbyterian church in Atlanta and as a solo pastor of a small Lutheran church in one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in Harrisburg, PA. While in Harrisburg he met a Navy recruiter who shared the tremendous need for chaplains, so Drew joined the reserves and trained as a chaplain thinking this would be a significant but part-time ministry. That call deepened and he found himself saying, "Here I am. Send me." He then found himself and his family in Norfolk, Virginia. He never doubted that he was called to this ministry, and yet, as he boarded that ship for the first time, he was terrified.

Drew now climbs all over the ship with ease and speaks Navy-speak fluently. Dave and I followed him up ladders and below deck to get a deeper sense of where he serves. At one point we paused on the bridge where Drew showed us his pulpit, the small metal ledge where he offers a brief evening prayer over the ship's PA system every night. The Porter's crew of 300 is a combination of every kind of faith, including Christian,

Muslim, Jewish along with those who have with no particular faith background of any kind, and his evening prayer reflects that. Early on, Drew offered a blessing to close his brief reflection:

Have a good one, y'all. Fight the good fight, and remember, you never walk alone, for you are more loved than you know and more cherished than you usually see.

He has gone on to offer the same prayer almost every night since, and when he doesn't end with these words, at least one sailor calls him out on it. These words are not Drew's. This is a prayer he picked up somewhere along the way and adopted as his own, and now these words have become the crucial liturgy for the Porter's crew. They are a sacred reminder. When a sailor calls Drew out for not saying it, Drew will meet the sailor wherever they are on the ship and they will say it together, because by now everyone knows the words by heart. These words remind the sailors—and Drew himself—that they are part of something larger, something that transcends one family, one ship, one Navy, one religion, or one nation.

It is a moment of worship that inspires Isaiah to answer God's call for a prophet, a person to speak God's Word to a people gone astray. When God gives Isaiah the full picture of a land destroyed, I am amazed that Isaiah doesn't say, "Never mind, God. This is not what I signed up for." Instead, he asks, "How long?" I have to believe that Isaiah hangs on to the seraphim's insistence that the earth is in fact *still* filled with God's glory even as Isaiah preaches to hearts of stone. I am convinced that the power of the worship and the words and songs of the seraphim give him the fuel he needs to do the work he is called to do. I am convinced that it is the liturgy enables Isaiah to look forward with stubborn hope to the promised time when a sprout pokes its way out of that stump, just as the sailors on the Porter draw on that nightly blessing for courage and strength to serve with honor and valor themselves. Something in the worship words gives all of them the hope to do what they are called to do.

Each Sunday, I catch my breath when I hear young voices praying the Lord's Prayer. While it is true that we offer this prayer to God, their voices also remind *me* of God's faithfulness in giving us daily bread and of God's promise that the kingdom will in fact come on earth as it is in heaven. These words, this liturgy reminds me that we are claimed, loved, and called by something larger, Someone who transcends one family, one

congregation, one denomination, one religion, or one nation. Words are never just words. Words have power. Words can demean and divide. Words can also encourage and inspire. What words do we carry from worshipping together in here into our work out there? What do we cling to from here and speak out there? What do we say to share even a tiny sprout of God's promised hope in the name of the Word made flesh, the very One who promises to redeem us all?

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

*Have a good one, y'all. Fight the good fight, and remember, you never walk alone, for you are more loved than you know and more cherished than you usually see.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.