



First United Church of Oak Park

Hallowed Be Thy Name

Isaiah 6:1-8

The Rev. Dr. Deborah Kapp

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King Uzziah was dead, and, frankly, I doubt many people noticed. He was pretty much an absentee king; he lived in a leprosy isolation ward for the last years of his life, after God struck him down with disease because Uzziah over-played his hand. Uzziah's hunger for attention blinded him to the norms of propriety. His lust for power outstripped his good sense. He forgot his place. As the book of Chronicles puts it, "As soon as Uzziah became powerful, he grew so arrogant that he acted corruptly" (II Chronicles 26:16 CEB). In consequence, God imposed on Uzziah what we might call, in modern terms, a heavenly impeachment. God removed Uzziah from office because he abused his power.

It is against this backdrop of political transition, arrogance, corruption, and callousness that our morning text is set.

Now, it would be easy to stop here and lay out the parallels – do a little riff on what I perceive to be the character flaws of the current occupant of the White House. But to do that would be a disservice to the text, because the setting for this narrative is social and spiritual as well as political. The dis-ease that troubles the people of Judah, to whom Isaiah preaches, is manifested in all aspects of the people's life.

Every once in a while I get an email from someone in the congregation who wonders why church leaders have not expressed more outrage over something that's occurred in our national life, such as a mass shooting, or discovering the extent of family separations at the border. These church members make a good point in their emails. They remind me and others that sometimes the church seems indifferent to human suffering.

Abraham Heschel says that people's indifference is exactly what gets Isaiah all worked up. Prophets like Isaiah are outraged when they see others ignoring human suffering. Heschel's word for it is callousness. "Callousness," he writes, "is sovereign and smug; it clings to the soul and will not give in. The crack of doom is in the air, but the people [are] unperturbed."¹ The prophets cry out against the people's indifference, our comfort level with the status quo, and our willingness to cross to the other side or avert our glances when we see someone who needs help.

In some of his work, Walter Brueggemann uses the language of numbness to talk about the same sort of thing. Sometimes people see so much suffering, and hear so many discouraging news reports that we simply become numb to the next one. We lose touch with our capacity to respond compassionately to situation after situation after situation.²

¹Abraham J. Heschel. *The Prophets: An Introduction*. Volume I (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969 [1962]), 90.

²I cannot remember where I read this, but I know I got the idea from Brueggemann.

It's not that we are bad people. We are human people, and none of us can bear the full weight of the world. We are also inventive people, and we have devised many ways to cushion ourselves so that we can avoid facing disaster or suffering face-to-face.

I say "we," but I know that many of you are not the least bit callous. You are out in the world every day fighting injustice and alleviating suffering. In secular and not-for-profit workplaces, in homes and neighborhoods, and in volunteer time you do God's good work. I know that. Nonetheless, I think it is also true that the callousness of which Heschel speaks infects our whole system.

It's in that context – our context – of political turmoil and an over-supply of indifference that this text comes to us this morning. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, seated on a throne, high and lifted up."

Who knows what happens in the temple that day? There are blazing coals and fire. There is smoke. I imagine the heavy aroma of incense. There are big, huge, six-winged creatures flying around. And God is there, too, in the smoke and the mystery and the heat and the glory of it all. And Isaiah is there, but in his mind, he is saying to himself, "I. SHOULD. NOT. BE. HERE."

Have you ever had that feeling? The feeling that you shouldn't be someplace, that you didn't belong? Or that you were really out of place?

Maybe it's a class thing. You've been invited to a really swanky gala and you attend, but then you find yourself surrounded by a level of wealth and privilege that you do not have and never will. You feel, "I don't really belong here."

Or maybe it has to do with other social distinctions we make. Maybe it's race. Or gender. In my younger days it was not unusual for me to be the only woman at a church meeting; when that was likely to occur I always wore my best, most tailored black suit, so I would be as intimidating as possible. I called it "dressing scary," because even though I felt out of place and was worried I would never measure up. I had discovered that, in reality, those men were as scared of me as I was of them, and I wanted to take advantage of that. But I still felt like I didn't belong. Sometimes I still do. Have you ever felt like that?

Your first semester at college?

Auditioning for some musical or play?

Your first days on a new job?

Maybe I'm the only person here who knows what it's like to be riddled with self-doubt, but I suspect I'm probably not.

Isaiah feels like he doesn't belong in that temple. I think he also feels small in the face of all that grandeur. Reading this text and imagining myself in Isaiah's shoes reminds me about how people talk of their visits to some of our grandest national parks. Human beings seem so small when we are overshadowed by the size and magnificence of those landscapes.

Whatever happens that day, Isaiah feels out of place. Worse. He feels like he is in trouble, that he is too sinful to be in God's presence. Maybe he is.

But Isaiah's sinfulness does not seem to be an obstacle for God. God forgives. God restores. God makes whole. And God invites even one who feels completely unworthy to go forth on God's behalf. The seraphim and the hot coals on the lips – that's a ritual cleansing, a visible sign of an invisible grace. The actor is God. And God forgives Isaiah, and, in forgiving, God sends him forth.

God sends forth an imperfect person into a callous world to do God's work. God sends forth Isaiah, armed only with forgiveness.

Isaiah is called to do difficult work. Just a few verses later, God tells Isaiah that his efforts will be pointless, that the world will be deaf and blind to his efforts, impervious to his prophecy. Yet God sends him, and yet Isaiah goes.

Why?

Because behind the arrogance and corruption of leaders like Uzziah; behind the callousness that clings to the world's soul; behind the numbness people like us might feel when we hear one more news report about misfortune or terror; behind all this people are hurting. Children hunger. Political and economic refugees freeze to death. Folks live paycheck to paycheck, right on the edge of catastrophe. The realities of arrogance, corruption, callous indifference, and their consequence are not limited to the eighth century BC.

God invites us to go into a world that is also distorted by human greed, pride, and hard-heartedness, because people need us there. Our mission may be just as difficult as Isaiah's. We may feel just as unequal to the task as he does. Yet God sends us and equips us just as God sends and equips Isaiah: with forgiveness, with restoration, with hope.

Glory and thanks be to the one who, by the power at work within us, is able to accomplish far more than we can hope or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Jesus Christ for all generations. Amen.