

As I begin this morning I wonder whether there can be anyone present who does not know the name Isaiah. Is there? Anyone out there not know the name? Who was he? Any ideas? Why is he so familiar to us?

So Isaiah was a great great prophet. For Christians he might be considered the greatest of prophets - after Jesus of course. His voice *booms* throughout the New Testament, especially the gospels. The Book of Isaiah contains unquestionably some of the most compelling words of the entire bible, words of force and power, full of prophetic insight, which have shaped our understanding of Jesus as the Christ, as well as Christian praise, worship, and song especially around Advent and Christmas: ‘For unto us a child is born’ ...’For behold a young woman shall conceive and bear a child’ from the great Immanuel prophecy, ‘Comfort ye my people’, ‘the people that walked in darkness’. Sound familiar? They do don’t they. Written more than 700 years before the birth of Christ these words have shaped *us*. That’s not even mentioning his suffering servant theme, four ‘servant songs’ of indescribable power and depth. They enrich the life of all who read them.

Believe it or not though, there is a passage from Isaiah that may be even more pivotal than those. It describes Isaiah’s first vision, the story of how God called him into ministry as a prophet and it was our first reading this morning.

Isaiah's meeting with the Divine One in the Temple is described with such clarity and visionary power that it's pretty hard *not* to re-experience it with him each time we read it:

*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.*

I've been reading it for decades but I still get a slight adrenaline rush when I see in my mind's eye Isaiah's vision of the hugeness and majesty of the Lord on His throne so high and lofty, the mere *hem* of His robe utterly *filling* the Temple, the largest, most majestic building in Isaiah's ancient world. We tend to over use the word *awesome*, but I do think it applies here – and then some.

I wish I had time to tell you all about the timing of this vision, and how significant it is that it happened in 740 BCE, the year that King Uzziah died, but there just isn't time!

I do want us to rest in Isaiah's vision for at least a few moments though. I invite you, entreat you in fact, to allow yourself to see what Isaiah saw. Feel free to close your eyes if you need to.

Six winged Seraphs are in attendance it says, 'above' the Lord. One of them holds a pair of tongs, and taking a live coal from the altar

touches Isaiah's lips, burning away all that might be unworthy or unholy in him. Allow that coal to touch your lips. Perhaps it will give to us, as it gave to Isaiah, the power to accept God's call, and to say, 'Here I am Lord. Send me.'

It is not just the Temple which is filled with a tiny fraction of the Lord's robe. One Seraph calls to another, singing a song which still resounds today, nearly 3000 years later: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the *whole earth* is full of his glory." It's a song of such unutterable holiness that literally hundreds of millions of people will sing it all over the world in millions of churches this morning. When we allow ourselves to see this vision of global praise, it comes home to us that what Isaiah saw is not only metaphorically and spiritually true but literally true as well. The whole earth *is* full of His glory, even as the hem of His robe fills *this* place.

It is difficult to imagine celebrating the Eucharist without this song, the Holy Holy, or *Sanctus* as it's still called after its Latin form. For me it calls forth a wonderful conversation we had here a couple of Sundays ago about the *purpose* of Eucharist. We asked ourselves or, truthfully, I asked us all about the *purpose* of Eucharist. What is it for? What does it do for us? For me, your responses were memorable and compelling. You said a lot, but I think the word *transformation* expresses the core of it: we're here to be

*transformed*, to be reminded of who we are and whose we are. In part we come here to grow into what we know ourselves to be but have not yet become, *and* in part, I think we come here to be changed *back* into ourselves after wandering away from what is truest about us.

And that's where the *next* part of Isaiah's calling comes in.

The Lord commands Isaiah to tell His people to 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' The message that comes to Isaiah out of his vision in the Temple is about deafness and blindness of his people. Would the people *not* have become unseeing and unhearing until Isaiah brought God's message to them? Or is it that The Lord is commanding them, through Isaiah, to do what they're already doing since they seem so bent on doing it? I think it may be the latter.

Perhaps God is encouraging them to take it to the max – 'until cities lie in waste' - so that they may eventually learn from their own experience the true extent of their deafness and blindness. Perhaps it is that, through Isaiah, The Lord is setting them free to discover themselves *for* themselves. We do this with our children sometimes. It makes sense that The Lord might do it with his.

'Go ahead,' He seems to say. 'Do not turn and be healed. Go do it as much as you need to, until there's nothing left but a stump of this mighty tree, and even that stump will be burned.' But - and there is a 'but', I think - that burned out stump will be a holy seed. It is from that remnant that new life will come. It is at that time that my people will turn and be healed – of their blindness and deafness one assumes.

The history of the Jewish people records – the Book of Isaiah itself in part – that this *did* take place: that a burned out stump, a fraction of the nation, returned across the desert from generations of exile in Babylon; that they saw things and heard things anew after that transforming experience. They saw the hand of God – and perhaps the hem of His robe – at work in their deliverance, and heard His voice in a way they had not previously been willing to do, in the benevolence of a foreign emperor for example, Cyrus of Persia, who had returned them to Jerusalem. They were finally ready to turn and be healed.

Perhaps this is part of the transforming purpose of Eucharist as well. Perhaps it heals *us* of *our* blindness and *our* deafness in a similar way. I'm inclined to think so. I'm also inclined to think that this healing purpose, this recovery of sight and hearing, is why the Holy Holy has been part of the Eucharist from the beginning. In a

way, the bread and wine of this sacrament have the same purpose as that burning coal from the Altar. Although not strictly speaking born by an angel using tongs, they touch our lips in that same angelic way. Is it not so? Does this sacrament not burn away from us what is impure and unholy? Does it not call us back to our true hearts? *And also* call us forward to what The Lord hopes we will be? I believe it does.

When we get caught up in the petty conflicts of our world and our communities we become blind and deaf in some very real ways. When we fail to love and forgive, when we don't even think it's an option, when we don't think Jesus means us when He talks about forgiving our enemies seventy times seven times, when we became scandalized and triggered, we lose our perspective. In truth we cannot fully see or hear when we are in that state. The purpose of the Eucharist is to awaken us from all that. We *know* we need to, so we bring ourselves to a place where it is just a little bit more possible to see the hem of the Lord's robe filling the Temple: a church like this one.

As we celebrate the Eucharist together it becomes possible for us to wake up, to remember that the purpose of this gathering is God's love – that God's love is the purpose of *us* in fact – and that the

entry point to God's healing love is a practice of radical forgiveness and love for all.

This is hard for us to accept at times, even in churches. Many of us have been Christians our whole lives, but even for us there are, at times, people we'd rather God did not invite to the heavenly banquet. It's worth considering from time to time, in light of the gospel, whether that is the best way for us to be toward each other. It's also good to be reminded that God knows better than we do and there can be no doubt that all those people have a place at His table. For some, we are the ones they'd rather not see, but God knows better and praise God, we are here at the table too.

It is the *recognition* of our own sin and God's absolute forgiveness and love experienced in the Eucharist that heals our blindness once and for all. Recognizing the sins of others doesn't help us much. When we understand *completely* that, just like everyone else, we have fallen short – that we are people of unclean lips and that it *cannot* be any other way – that is when we are ready to forgive. *That* is when we're finally ready to open our eyes and see. *That* is when we understand *finally* that there will always be a place for us at this table. And when we do, we finally *hear* the angel's song.