

Sermon: Sunday, May 30, 2021 – Isaiah 6: 1-8
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Introduction

As we begin this service, I invite you to review with me the first half of the Christian year. We have moved from Advent and the birth of Jesus (Christmas), to the season of Epiphany, a time of revelation and light. The season of Lent gave time for reflection and self-assessment, Holy Week takes us to Good Friday, the most difficult day of the Christian year; Easter and the weeks that follow are a time of resurrection joy, walking with the risen Christ. With the ascension, and the bestowing of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we arrive at today's service – on the cusp of what is sometimes called "ordinary time"- an in-between time that is neither Christmas nor Easter, nor the seasons before or after.

Truth be told, I'm ready for some "ordinary time" because first half of the year is extra-busy, at least from a Worship planner's standpoint. Today, then, let's take a deep breath, and move through our morning gathering with a sense of spaciousness and an absence of "hurry". That may well mean that today's service will run longer than the usual 36-to-43-minute services that I have been aiming for on YouTube and if so, well, it will take the time it needs to take.

The story of Isaiah's call, a scene of awe and wonder, will be our gentle guide into this time of reflection and praise.

Sermon - Watch service at <https://youtu.be/5QivibFck1E>

Following the intention set earlier in today's service, I'd like to approach the reading from Isaiah more from an emotional level, than from an academic or intellectual standpoint. As such, now would be a good time to get yourself sitting comfortably – perhaps looking outside through a window or being outside on a deck or balcony or public bench or lawn chair – and in that place, seek the intersections between this text, and my words, and your hopes and hesitations, your experience, your journey.

In a time of national uncertainty, when there was a transition on their throne, a miraculous encounter opens before young Isaiah. If I could give this an appropriate visual, it might be a dry ice show at a big, theatric rock concert... or perhaps more appropriately, a day of heavy, looming mist which gives these mountains of the Bow Valley an even more majestic look than usual. He describes it like so:

[In the year that King Uzziah died] I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train^[a] of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

A scene of awe, and wonder. We note that Isaiah describes this not as a dream, but as being in the very presence of God. Anyone who has had such numinous moments remembers them as unique, life-changing, and pure gift even if they are beyond interpretation. We are right to be suspicious of those who make wild claims prefaced by "God told me this" – especially if the words or actions are clearly contrary to the loving intention of God – yet I do not wish such false or misguided claims to make us uneasy about naming the moments when the Divine does reach into our daily living and touches our very being.

If you can identify a time or times of deep intimacy with the Holy, I invite you to bring it into your consciousness now. Or if that is not the case, find a memory that placed you amidst awe and wonder – a mountain vista, a holy site, a newborn child, a connection with the intricacy of creation – wherever you have been taken aback by AWE...

Stay with that feeling of awe and wonder for few moments, and let it lift up other related emotions: praise, hopefulness, bewilderment, amazement, ecstasy... whatever happens within your soul as you revisit awe and wonder....

These emotions that arise from awe and wonder lead us to the next section of Isaiah's religious experience:

⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

What do we make of this place and these emotions? One of the natural responses to something majestic, is the humility of realizing one's mortality and one's relative size. Being in the presence of the holy may also, as it did for Isaiah, take one deeper into guilt or shame, a sense of personal shortfall, or admission of one's participation in and benefit from unjust societal schemes.

In the midst of guilt, shame, humility, and culpability, it is important to recognize the constructive ability of these emotions to help us re-set things that need re-setting, without allowing them to crush our spirit or demean our selfhood. crushed or demeaned by them. Life is not designed to be ruled by guilt and shame... and yet at times, they can call us to be honest about realities we are well aware of yet try to hide from. The healthy versions of guilt and shame, in appropriate amounts, can hold a mirror up to us and ask, "is this how you want to be? Really?"

If this speaks to your experience, and if you can do so safely, I invite you to sit with these difficult things for a few moments: recollections of times when you are not acting from your best self... frustration or anger or guilt, at living in a society where race and class and gender and gender identity and education and affluence and physical attributes and abilities all give automatic advantage... sorrow at how easily convenience and personal desires become more important than attending to the needs of the planet.... Spend some time in those places where Isaiah's expression of being a person of unclean lips, living amidst a people of unclean lips, rings true in your life and our life....

Fortunately, Isaiah does not get stuck or stranded in this place – God does not pile on further harsh realities, but through the "fiery creatures" reaches out to him:

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

It is not God's desire that we spend our lives burdened by guilt or shame or embarrassment, and it is certainly not God's desire that anyone else should hold power to stunt your life by weaponizing these feelings against you. In this other-worldly ecstatic religious experience described by Isaiah, God initiates the act of healing – a time of purification, cure, restoration, release.

And so I invite you to re-visit the hard places you were just remembering, places of shame or embarrassment or hopelessness, and to realize God's intention to reach, with healing love, across the seeming chasm between you and God. From that initial diminished place, God invites you to find determination – and offers support - to engage in life-affirming, loving

change. What negative narratives need to change or just stop, to let you respond positively to this Divine reach-out? How might you seek and receive the support of God, through prayer, through trusted friends, through self-affirmation, to step into the glorious fullness of life? How will you embrace from here forward, what Mary Oliver described as “your one wild and precious life?”

From that point of healing and hope, we move to the final stanza of Isaiah’s vision:

⁸ *And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”*

From a time of important self-realization and God’s own invitation to new possibilities, comes an opportunity for mission; and Isaiah steps up and says YES. This culmination of an inward process with an action that turns to the world in a spirit of loving outreach, reminds me of the poem by Lynn Ungar, which many of us encountered a year or so ago.

“Pandemic. What if you thought of it as the Jews consider the Sabbath—the most sacred of times?

“Cease from travel. Cease from buying and selling. Give up, just for now, on trying to make the world different than it is.

Sing. Pray. Touch only those to whom you commit your life.

Center down.

And when your body has become still, reach out with your heart.

Know that we are connected in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.

(You could hardly deny it now.)

Know that our lives are in one another’s hands.

(Surely, that has come clear.)

Do not reach out your hands. Reach out your heart. Reach out your words.

Reach out all the tendrils of compassion that move, invisibly, where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health, so long as we all shall live.”

As we consider Isaiah’s response to his call, to share God’s healing love in many diverse ways... as we consider Lynn Ungar’s beautiful words... as we consider the joys and challenges of being more social again... as we imagine what re-engagement might look like personally, societally, and as a community of faith... and as we acknowledge other callings from God that may be totally independent of the strangeness of these pandemic-impacted years, 2020 and 2021... I invite you pay attention to the emotions that come to you when you imagine responding to God’s callings: excitement or trepidation, relief or uncertainty, thankfulness or unease, whatever arises. No matter what your response, let it connect you to the Holy One who reaches out in love, to guide you into the mysterious world of what-comes-next.

Our time with the 6th chapter of Isaiah ends for now, with this prayer:

For the emotional landscape of our lives, and for the God, experienced in the majesty of the Creator, the humility of the Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is our companion and guide across all the terrain of life, we give our humble thanks and praise. Amen.

Authors cited:

Oliver, Mary. “The Summer Day”.

http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/oliver_thesummerday.html

Ungar, Lynn. “Pandemic” <https://www.lynnungar.com/poems/pandemic/>

© 2021 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.