

WHO WILL GO FOR US?

Isaiah 6:1-13

Last week we began our Lenten pilgrimage towards the Cross of Christ by meditating on the message found in Isaiah chapter one. That chapter may be thought of as a microcosm of the entire book, because in it we find both indictment and invitation. The indictment was that God's people no longer knew the Lord, nor did they understand His ways:

“The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”

Nevertheless, in His undying love and amazing grace, the Lord makes this invitation:

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool ... I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities. I will restore your judges as in days of old, your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City.”

We saw how important it is for us to understand that ancient Judah is a mirror image of our own state of affairs here in Canada. We were encouraged to pray for national repentance leading to revival so that Victoria will become a city of righteousness, and Canada a land of righteousness.

Now, as we open Isaiah 6, we are confronted with the startling vision of Isaiah, standing before the Lord God Almighty, whose holiness and glory far eclipse and transcend anything words can express. The angels cover their faces, and as they call out to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory,” the temple is shaken and filled with smoke.

The outcome of this vision is that Isaiah is cleansed and then commissioned to take the message of God to the people. What can we learn, and in what ways can we be changed as we hear the voice of the prophet?

First, notice that the chapter opens with the mention of King Uzziah's death. Uzziah had been a powerful king, one who had done what was right in the eyes of the Lord (2 Chron. 26:4) for much of his 52 year reign. But after he became powerful, pride led to his downfall and he became unfaithful. He was stricken with leprosy which afflicted him until the day he died. His son, Jotham, would rule as king for sixteen years, doing what was right in the eyes of the Lord, but the people would continue their corrupt practices (2 Chron. 27:2). Jotham would be succeeded by Ahaz, a desperately wicked king who would also rule for sixteen years.

So Isaiah stands in the shadow of Uzziah's death, and on the brink of what would become a downward spiral under Jotham and Ahaz. More importantly, he stands before the Lord! Isaiah may have said to himself, “The king is now dead. Who is the real King in this world anyway?” This is a question we ought to ask ourselves as we consider the machinations of our own governmental leaders. Who is the real King? In verse 5, Isaiah will answer the question. “My eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” Have I seen the King? Have you?

Look at Isaiah's response to the vision of the Lord God. It is a vision that shatters every pretense, strips away the last vestiges of self-delusion. All Isaiah can say is, "Woe is me! I am ruined!" It is not merely that Isaiah is finite and he now stands in the presence of the Infinite One. It's more than that. Isaiah is unclean. He is morally defiled, stained with sin. Sin permeates his very being; it is on the inside and it is on his lips. What's on the inside always makes its way to the surface, sooner or later. The tongue becomes the expression of the heart.

Isaiah has heard the words on the lips of the seraphs and he knows that such words cannot come rightly from his lips. His lips have been used to praise himself, put others down, and serve his own ends. How could they ever be used in such holy service? He is stunned into silence. He cannot even marshal sufficient faculties to ask for cleansing. He is simply ruined, and his dereliction seems beyond remedy.

But look! How gracious is our Lord! Isaiah apparently underestimates the grace of God. The vision has not been given in order to annihilate him. The fire is not brought to destroy the offending lips. Not at all. Isaiah is given this terrifying vision, and he is touched with the very fire of God, so that having seen both God and himself in right perspective, he is now ready for his true vocation.

No one can truly serve the Lord until they have come to the end of themselves. The process of becoming a servant of the Lord begins with the recognition of the character and nature of God. It continues with the recognition of the enormous gulf between us and God – the gulf of our sinfulness. He is holy and righteous and we are not. It is only when we are brought face to face with the enormity of our unworthiness that we begin to understand the enormity of God's grace in reaching out to us.

The fire of God is taken from the altar of God and applied to Isaiah's lips, and he is told that his guilt has been taken away and his sin atoned for. Throughout the Bible fire is a key symbol of God. The flaming swords of Genesis chapter 3 symbolize God's unapproachable holiness. Sinful Adam and Eve were barred from returning to the Garden of Eden and going back to the straight-forward fellowship they had enjoyed with the Creator. Later, when Moses had his life-changing meeting with God on Mount Sinai, he was drawn to a burning bush that was not consumed. Still later it was the fire of God that fell upon Elijah's sacrifice on Mount Carmel.

Fire is destructive, yet it is also cleansing and refining; it is frightening, yet fascinating; what it consumes it leaves darkened, yet in the process it generates light (John Oswalt). As the fire is applied to Isaiah's mouth it represents nothing less than an encounter with the living God. Isaiah is now ready for service.

What happens next is intriguing. Isaiah is neither conscripted nor commanded into service. There is no direct call from the Lord. In verse 8 the Lord merely asks a question: "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" But the prophet's experience of divine grace and the fire that now burns in Isaiah's heart makes him want to be of service to the majestic King of the universe. I am sure that Isaiah felt the same as Jeremiah felt when he said about God, "If I say, 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot" (Jer. 20:9).

This is what moves those who have been touched by God, truly touched. It's the fire of God burning in their bones! When it's there, they cannot keep it in. It compels them to speak the words of God with courage and with power! As John Oswalt puts it so well:

“The fire has not touched our lips so that we can taste the candy better. Nor has it touched our lips so that we can become golden-tongued orators. Rather, the burning sacrifice of Christ has been laid on us so that we too will be able to lay down our lives for our gracious God and for those who will hear whenever that becomes possible.”

Oh how right he is! The blight of our time is the modern-day prosperity gospel. But where was the luxury palace Jesus lived in while on earth? How many of the apostles died in their own bed? Were men like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Micah called to world-wide success with legions of followers trailing after them, pressing cash contributions upon them? Not at all!

More often than not they were given difficult messages to proclaim to those who did not want to listen. They were to speak the words of God which are always true, though often unwelcome. The proof of this is in verses 9-10. By the way, these two verses are the most often quoted verses from Isaiah in the New Testament. They are quoted in all four Gospels and in Acts¹. At first reading it seems as if God does not want his people to turn and be healed, but nothing could be farther from the truth.

The land was full of false prophets who preached to the itching ears of a people whose hearts were hardened. Isaiah could have decided to join the ranks of such prophets. What if he had preached a message of affirmation and encouragement, a message that did not address the people’s sinful condition? No doubt he would have gained a large number of followers, ones who would have been deluded into thinking they were spiritually alright. A few might have been encouraged to think warm thoughts about God, and some might even have decided to make a little more room for God in their lives. But without the truth being preached to them, the long-term effects of such preaching would be devastating to the nation. So the Lord calls upon Isaiah to preach a message that, given the already hardened hearts of the people, will only make them resentful, resistant, and even more rebellious toward the Lord. But because the message is the truth, bitter medicine though it may be, a remnant will turn in repentance and experience healing in the Lord.

So then, Isaiah’s calling was not to success as the world counts success, but to faithfulness. And because Isaiah accepted that difficult commission, we are here reading his book twenty-seven centuries later. All of the false prophets, who preached a message of their own – not from God – are forgotten!

1. Matt. 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:26-27.

What will be the outcome of Isaiah’s faithfulness in preaching the Word of God? Look at verses 11-13. Isaiah asks, “For how long, O Lord?” In other words, “How long must I preach this message of judgment?” The Lord’s answer is to the effect that he must faithfully preach it until the judgment has fallen. The only hope of healing for these people is in near total destruction. It is only when all seems lost beyond recall that a ray of hope will appear. The people, who have endured too long in their foolish pride and open rebellion, will have to be cut down. The nation, which was like a stately forest during the golden age of King David and King Solomon, will be reduced to a wasteland of stumps. Such is the metaphorical language of Isaiah. Such is the people’s spiritual condition.

But look at the ray of hope at the end of verse 13. Even as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land. Surely this is a reference to that remnant that will turn in repentance and find healing. It also foreshadows the coming of Messiah himself. We know this because in chapter 11 we read of a “shoot that will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit” (11:1). In that chapter, Isaiah paints a portrait of the Messiah, filled with the Spirit of the Lord, coming in righteousness and justice. Isaiah’s preaching will not be fruitless. It will help to prepare for the coming of Messiah!

We need faithful servants of the Lord today in our land. We need men and women who will stand up and speak the Word of God with courage. We need men and women of vision who know the Lord and understand his ways. We can be those men and women if we are willing to come to the end of ourselves and let God touch us with a live coal from his altar. Then the fire of God will burn in us. We must pray that we the people of God will move deeper into God’s holiness. We must pray for national repentance leading to revival in our land.