

**Seeing Something New**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Isaiah 6:1-8**  
**Trinity Sunday**  
**5-27-2018**

The ceiling here in the meetinghouse is probably 25-30 feet high. On Sundays, I wear a robe that is approximately 58 inches long, the hem of which is two inches. I don't think it's an understatement to say that we have a higher-than-normal ceiling. And I don't think it's an understatement to say that the hem of my robe represents a large amount of fabric.

But this morning, we hear about a vision of a God who is so big, that when She sits on Her throne, the hem of Her robe fills the entire Jerusalem temple, a building with a ceiling at least five times the height of our meetinghouse. That's a lot of fabric!

And as this fabric flows and flows, we hear about two seraphs, winged creatures – no that's an understatement -- REALLY-winged creatures; they've each got THREE sets of wings: one to cover their faces, one to cover their feet, and one for flying. And these mystical beasts levitate above Yahweh on Her throne, and proclaim: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! The whole world is full of Her glory." But if the sight isn't enough to stir your imagination, the sound sure is. The words of the winged creatures are so powerful they shake the temple doors, and the whole place fills with smoke.

This is Raiders of the Lost Ark-kind of stuff. This puts Moses and the burning bush to shame!

And if we are not careful, we can let the bigness of this scene prevent us from understanding it in a larger context. Yes, theophanies, that is encounters with the divine, often reflect the spectacle of God's awesomeness. But be careful not to miss the forest for the spectacle.

It's important for us to remember what's happening when Isaiah receives this vision and call. And it's important for us to remember how Isaiah responds to this vision and call.

A word about the setting of our story.

Fleming James describes an Eighth Century Judah as "teeming with prosperity in which there had grown up a young aristocrat who regarded it with aversion."

We know this young aristocrat as the writer of First Isaiah. James reckons that Isaiah would have been familiar with the prophet Amos, and read his words with a burning heart. James describes today's setting as follows:

Taught perhaps by his great predecessor Amos, Isaiah looked beneath the splendor of the society about him and perceived that such splendor was purchased at the expense of the poor. Wealth went hand in hand with oppression; peasants were being evicted from their farms to make way for large landholdings and fine manor houses; justice was perverted, violence rife. The religious devotion of the people remained a formal thing taken over at secondhand from their teachers, devoid of understanding as to the true nature of God and God's demands. Judah's cosmopolitanism was issuing in a religious syncretism that Yahweh could never tolerate.

Through all the national life ran a pride and self-compliance, a satisfaction in luxury, display, military strength and material wealth which led people to forget their dependence on God.

But Isaiah could not forget God. Over against the pride and sin of his people he set the thought of Yahweh looking down at it all in wrath. And then one day, in the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw Yahweh in Her temple. (James, 247-8).

Today's passage tells us that God's splendor is revealed only to those who dare to look past the futility and insincerity of humanity's artificial grandeur. Isaiah refused to let his imagination be held captive by and swept up in Judah's groping for prosperity. Jerusalem was indeed a bustling, modern, successful capital. But its heart and its spirit were not of the same accord as David's city was some three centuries earlier. So Isaiah refused to stare into an artificial flame. And instead, he spent his days in the temple, searching and praying and studying and preparing for the presence of God. And one day, he saw it. He really saw it.

And how did Isaiah respond? With humility. And with a sense of corporate confession. Isaiah didn't proclaim, "Yes, finally, God, you have rewarded my devotion. What can I do to help you smite all of these sinners?" Instead, it's the opposite. Isaiah realizes instantly that he is in the presence of something pure and perfect and much bigger than himself. And he says, "Not only have I sinned, but my people have too, because we have not created the kind of caring, reverent world you've instructed us to." In other words, Isaiah, in the presence of God, realizes that his whole being is not just bound up in his individual life, but also in the lives of those around him. And he doesn't just have the responsibility to live in covenant with God individually, but to help his neighbors do so, too.

The seraphs cleanse Isaiah's lips with a hot coal so that he may speak truth. And when God asks, "Whom shall I send," Isaiah responds, "Here am I. Send me!"

Isaiah's will not be a happy call. God asks him to speak truth to a people who will not listen. As a matter of fact, the more Isaiah speaks, the more hardened the people will be in receiving his message. And eventually the perceived prosperity of Jerusalem will be whittled down to a stump, and its people scattered in exile. But the God with a long robe, is also a God with a creative spark. And the stump of Jerusalem will be a seed. And that seed will one day give way to a strong and sturdy tree. Her branches will not be stunted by idolatry and greed and the pursuit of power. Instead, her branches will grow generously, nourished by the compassion of a covenant people bound to a compassionate God.

If I were to be 100% honest with you this morning, I'd tell you that I stand in awe of Isaiah, and of his convictions. Because I don't think we live in a time much different than his. Wealth still walks hand in hand with oppression: affordable housing gives way to McMansions in every zip code of our city. Justice is still perverted: there's a big ole' thumb on the scales, and it's not a thumb that favors the tired, or the poor, or the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. And violence is still ripe: domestic abuse is rampant, and the marginalized are discarded, or pitted against one another. And our young men, especially our young men of color, know incarceration all too well.

And yes, there are days, when like Isaiah, I turn my gaze upon the temple. And I hope, and I pray, and I long, and I plan for God's presence. And I see a new world, where God's presence bursts into the present.

But there are too many other days when I turn my gaze elsewhere. I am distracted by the Dow Jones Industrial Average, or the jobs report, or the corporate tax rate, or the latest opinion poll, or the most salacious new headline of scandal – I somehow believe that these trends and stories will help sweep out the wrong leaders and sweep in the right ones. And I somehow believe that these leaders, by implementation of treaties, or laws, or programs, will bring about God’s justice, will make ours a city on the hill. And I’m willing to admit that I enjoy the privileges associated with my wealth and social status. But most days, I’m not all that ready to give up the comforts that come with those privileges.

I suppose, that just like those good folks in eighth-century Jerusalem, I’m enamored, sometimes consciously, sometimes subconsciously, with the pride and self-compliance of our national life. And that pride makes me forget my dependence on God. And even if I didn’t vote for the guy whose idolatry rivals that of empires past, I am still part of a community immersed in idolatry. And I hate to say it, but there are too many mornings, when I want Jack Nicholson on that wall, and I need Jack Nicholson on that wall.

I guess what I’m saying is that I’m way too dependent on things God has taught me to NOT to be dependent on. And in my search for independence, I have grown too dependent of the things that do NOT give life.

On this Trinity Sunday, I confess to be a man of unclean lips, who lives among a people of unclean lips. And I long to see a Queen, a Lord of Hosts, who can cleanse my lips, and with Her touch put truth in my voice and love in my heart. And yours too!!!

Perhaps this figure will be a parent or creator. Perhaps she’ll be a wise woman offering wisdom at the city gates. Perhaps it’ll be a mysterious, fluid spirit that lingers like a cloud. Perhaps he’ll be a Galilean peasant with powerful words and a loving touch. Or maybe a bush that’s not consumed, or a dude with a really long robe, or the sound of silence. Or maybe in a number even more complete than three.

To be honest, I could really care less about the form. I’m more concerned about the transformation. Friends, may God give us the strength to be like Isaiah: to be people with the courage to seek out God in a world that’s bent on seeking something other than God; to be people who will listen for God in a world where people want to listen to anything but God; to be people who will recognize our dependence on God in a world stuck on the fallacies of self-preservation and self-sufficiency.

And whether in fiery flame, or burning bush, or flowing robe, or quaking temple, or simply in the eyes of a child or the hospitality of a neighbor, may we like Isaiah, see God, and respond, “Here am I, Lord. Send me!”

And in the seeing of, listening to, and responding to God, may our stump become a seed, and our seed a loving, sturdy tree. A tree rooted in, and wholly dependent on the love of God.

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.

Source:

Fleming James; Personalities of the Old Testament; Charles Scribner’s and Sons: New York, NY, 1949