

6 In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, the edges of his robe filling the temple. 2 Winged creatures were stationed around him. Each had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two their feet, and with two they flew about. 3 They shouted to each other, saying:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of heavenly forces!
All the earth is filled with God's glory!"

4 The doorframe shook at the sound of their shouting, and the house was filled with smoke.

5 I said, "Mourn for me; I'm ruined! I'm a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips. Yet I've seen the king, the Lord of heavenly forces!"

6 Then one of the winged creatures flew to me, holding a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 He touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed."

8 Then I heard the Lord's voice saying, "Whom should I send, and who will go for us?"

I said, "I'm here; send me." - ***Common English Bible***

Last week we heard about the evils the Assyrian empire visited upon ancient Israel, the Judeans in particular. Remember the relief with stacked Judean heads? Well, in the year King Uzziah died, the setting for today's reading, this ended a fifty year period of stable leadership for the small and vulnerable nation of Judah (a fragment of a divided Israel)— a moment when Assyria's massive army was encroaching on Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. This army was the most formidable of its time— advanced weaponry, massive economic support, and a penchant for psychological warfare— hence the stacks of heads??? In contrast, what was the state of Jerusalem at the time? A city with hastily erected defenses filled with refugees from the countryside and other captured cities. It was not looking good for Judah when King Uzziah died. Not at all.

Why should we care about the political climate for the people of God thousands of years ago? Well, gosh. Because the more things change, the more they stay the same, right? One presidential candidate has been projected as winner, but the other candidate is unwilling to concede. Some suggest that a delayed transition strategy compromises our national security. We know that our country is deeply divided and more heavily

Prepared by Pastor Sarah Sanderson-Doughty for St. Andrew's Presbyterian, Portland, OR

armed than ever before. And Corona Virus cases are surging all throughout the nation, including in our own state. We're seeing numbers like never before. And of course there's that shaky economy, still so many out of work, still so many businesses closing. These are highly unstable times in the United States of America, and indeed on planet earth. But nationally we are not parallel to tiny Judah... we're still, relatively speaking, a massive force in this world. Our feelings might be resonant, but our situations aren't parallel.

But the situation of our church, both our denomination and this congregation in particular... well, that's a bit parallel. We have had moments of glory in our past, to which our building, like the temple of ancient Israel, is a monument, but at present we're a much smaller community, exiled from that building for the most part... where in recent memory this was a multi-pastor led congregation, we've been led by one pastor for the past three years... though we've maintained regular, steady worship on-line, the gathered congregation is nearly half the size of our typical gathering in person before the pandemic... we've already lost a lot, and it's hard not to anticipate more loss... hearts are heavy... The church does not occupy the place of prominence it did fifty years ago. We feel pushed aside by other, bigger cultural forces. Do you feel that sometimes? Some anxiety or grief about the state and future of the church?

I know that the feelings are varied and mixed. But I want to make it clear that there's room for all of them here. It is totally appropriate to feel all these feelings—good, bad, indifferent. And I imagine that Isaiah, when he showed up in the temple in the year that King Uzziah died, might have been feeling all the feelings. He went seeking a word from God in the midst of threatening, frightening, uncertain times. And what he got was a vision, an awe inspiring vision that surely dropped him to his knees. In the earthly temple, he had a vision of a heavenly temple with a giant God seated on a throne and six winged flying serpents singing of God's exceeding holiness— This is the only place in all of scripture where God is called holy three times. Holy, Holy, Holy— seems commonplace to us perhaps... that is one of the most beloved hymns of all time. But it is an extreme statement of God's holiness— and the message seems to be that it is God's holiness, which fills the earth— stretching beyond the boundaries of the Assyrian empire —God's holiness will protect Judah, not military might.

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Imagine that! The vision reveals it is God's holiness, God's power, God's glory that will protect Judah, not human constructions of power and force— not human plans and strategies. God alone is the hope of Judah. I wonder if the same is true for us. God alone is our hope, just as it was for ancient Judah according to the prophet's vision.

Isaiah is overwhelmed by what he is seeing and hearing— the giant temple door is shaking, smoke is filling the room, six winged serpents are flapping about and shouting their songs... the hem of God's robes fills the temple... and in the presence of such glory and grandeur Isaiah feels small and sinful— "Mourn for me! I'm ruined! I'm a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. Yet I've seen the king, the lord of heavenly forces!" The circumstances of his own life and his nation seemed especially bleak in the light of this glory. God's response to Isaiah's confession of sin, was to send one of the winged creatures to place a hot coal on his lips— a very specific remedy for the specific sin that was named— the lips are unclean so they are burned to be purified. This had to be painful— a burning coal on the lips?? But with the pain came words of assurance "See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed."

Sometimes the process of being freed from our sin is painful— first we hurt, then we're free. So if we're hurting right now we might be on the way to new freedom...a new freedom and a divine invitation.

Isaiah experiences a new freedom, and as he does, he not only sees a vision, he hears a word; Isaiah hears God ask the heavenly forces "Whom should I send? Who will go for us?" Without hesitation, Isaiah raises his head. "I'm here," he calls out. "Send me." He doesn't even know what God needs done, but he steps forth and makes a commitment. It turns out that what God needs done is pretty difficult and painful, but he's all in.

In the next week you are invited to make commitments to this church for the year ahead— a year that holds much uncertainty. You have a faithful board of elders working hard to keep us moving toward the vision discerned in the past few years, and nimbly respond to every new challenge that complicates our common life. But none of us can know what 2021 will hold. Could any of us EVER have imagined 2020? We can't know specifically what 2021 will call out of us, but we can know that we will continue to

connect in Christ with God, with each other, and with neighbors in need. That is who we are. That is what we do. And it is to that continued connection that we are asking you to commit. You might feel small or unworthy at this particular moment. You might feel like you are not up to the demands of this moment... if you are feeling especially heavy hearted, I invite you to give me a call or send me a message this week, let me pray with you or for you.

It is my prayer that just as Isaiah had a strong connection to God that day in the temple, so too might this whole church, so too might each of its members. Such a strong connection is awe inspiring and it is what makes courageous commitment possible. I also pray that each and every member might realize that God's got this congregation. So beyond any human plan or strategy is what we need. We need to stand ready to do whatever it is God calls us to do... committing all that we are and have to God's service. Each of us. We're here. God will send us, if only we let God.

Here we are, God. Send us.