

*Whom shall I send?
Isaiah 6:1-13*

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Isaiah 6:1-13 (RSV)

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." 6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" 9 He said, "Go and tell this people:

*" 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'*

*10 Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.*

*Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed."*

11 Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?"

And he answered:

*"Until the cities lie ruined
and without inhabitant,
until the houses are left deserted
and the fields ruined and ravaged,*

*12 until the LORD has sent everyone far away
and the land is utterly forsaken.*

*13 And though a tenth remains in the land,
it will again be laid waste.
But as the terebinth and oak
leave stumps when they are cut down,
so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."*

The Scripture today again comes from the time of Israel's long civil war. You probably remember what happened. After David and Solomon's relatively brief reigns during which the country was united, the constant squabbling among Israel's tribes resumed. This time, however, it was all out war as Israel split apart into two: Israel to the north and Judah to the south.

In the north, the land known as Israel, one corrupt king after another weakened the people's faith in God, their moral sense, and their physical defences against foreign powers.

In the south, the land known as Judah, there had been many bad kings, too, but recently here had been 40 years of relative peace under a good king, Uzziah.

Do you know how old Good King Uzziah was when he started his promising reign?

King Uzziah came to power when he was about 16 years old. He started off well. He lived righteously. He built up the defences of the land and refitted the army. The land flourished under his leadership. There was relative peace; trade caravans began to move; wealth poured into the land. He began building projects along the coast, and especially down into the desert of the Negev. The population of Judah grew. Sickness and the devastation of war receded and industry and commerce advanced.

Uzziah ruled into his 60s. But over those years Uzziah, who became king at 16 with a clear vision of the Lord as his helper, began to think that he was actually the one who was accomplishing all of these good things for his people. And so the same thing happened to him as seems to happen to every leader who is successful, and perhaps to every one of us as we become older and relatively successful: he became proud and thought of himself as quite something. He knew he was good at what he did, and he wanted the people to see that it was because of him that all these good things were happening.

And then one day when his pride had reached its pinnacle his world came crashing down.

Seeking the glory of the people and to show them that he could even make God do for them what he wanted, Uzziah entered the Temple, perhaps heading right for the Holy of Holies itself, something that was forbidden for anyone except for the High Priest himself to do. Eighty priests stood up against him, ready to fight off the king and his troops in order to defend the holiness of the house of God.

Uzziah, the proud ruler, was angry. Understandably so. He wasn't going to be stopped by a bunch of priests. So he grabbed the incenser in his hand in order to enter the most holy part of the Temple and claim what he thought was rightfully his. But, God stepped in and struck Uzziah with a sudden, virulent form of leprosy, or perhaps skin cancer, on his forehead. The priests saw it and were horrified. They rushed Uzziah out of the Temple so that he would not defile the Temple. From that day king Uzziah was forced to live alone, cut off from his people and from the Lord in His Temple until he died a weakened, fragile man. The once brilliant and godly young king had become a proud older man who was now exiled from his own people until his death 11 years later when he was about 68.

And in that very same year that King Uzziah died yet another young man of again about 16 saw a vision of that very same Temple in which King Uzziah had been struck by God. In his vision, Isaiah saw a king, but this wasn't king Uzziah. Isaiah saw the King of the universe, God Himself!

Isaiah saw what even the priests in the Temple would never see. Priests could indeed go where no King could go into the Temple. But no matter how holy they were, even priests would never see God. Yet this teen-ager, Isaiah, does! He actually sees the Lord, high and lifted up, dressed in vestments that are more splendid than those of any king. And this God is not accompanied by body-guards to protect the king. This God is flanked by angels of the highest rank of heaven, who cry out with thunderous voices and herald the Lord's presence: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory". And when they cried out, much more than incense filled the Temple: billows of smoke rose up as the very foundations shook.

And how did this teen-ager, this 16 year old Isaiah, respond? Exactly as Uzziah the king should have, exactly as any priest should have. Isaiah's response is to fall on his face before the Lord and cry out: "Woe is me! for I am undone." Unlike the king, unlike the priests ... this 16 year old gets it right.

Let me pause a moment and ask you: Do we get it right? The first action when any of us find ourselves in the presence of the God of the universe... whether here in church, or in prayer at home, or wherever it might be, and no matter what looks we get from anyone around us... should be to fall on our faces before God and cry out: Woe is me. For there is none holy enough or good enough or righteous enough or successful enough to stand or sit in God's presence. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And we still do!

The philosopher Peter Kreeft tells the story of two of his college students, perhaps about 18 years old. One a Catholic invited the other, a Muslim, to Mass. After Mass, he found the two students arguing. He came and asked what was going on. The Catholic said: He's telling me that I'm a liar. Kreeft turned to the Muslim student: Why? The Muslim student said: "He says that when he goes up for communion he's actually in the presence of God. In fact, he says that the bread and the wine actually are God. But, then he comes back here and sits down. If that really were God up there, he would be flat on his face before the Almighty. That's why I don't think that he's telling the truth about what he believes." Who understood best what was happening. The Catholic or the Muslim? Kreeft knew: the Muslim student got it right: if what the Catholic student was saying was true, then the proper posture before God was exactly the one that Isaiah had taken.

So let me return and remind you: Isaiah the teen-ager got it right because he saw that day what many of us have yet to learn, which is how false our words are. The teen-ager Isaiah cries out: "[Woe is me] because my lips are unclean, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Isaiah knew that to that point in his life he had confessed God's greatness, but it was a lie because he hadn't really known how great God was. But, now that he had seen the Lord, he knew how little he had understood of the greatness of the Lord. And he knew that his people were no different. Isaiah now knows that because of their lies both he and his people need their mouths washed out with soap.

And that is exactly what happens. Well, actually it's worse. One of these angelic body-guards of God flies to Isaiah with a burning piece of charcoal taken from the Temple altar with tongs. Too hot even for an angel to touch? But the angel sears that charcoal right onto Isaiah's lying lips.

Does it hurt? Whoa! Can you imagine how much it would have hurt? But when it is done, the lie is gone. The falsehood is gone. The sin is removed.

Ask yourselves: how much does it hurt to have sin removed? How much did it cost the one who has taken away the sin of the world? How much does it cost us when we fall into sin and find out how hard it is to confess what we have done? No anaesthetic. You must be fully awake during the process. It did hurt, and it will hurt. I ain't gonna lie. Removing sin never has been, and never will be easy. But, the result is worth it, because the other option is living and dying a lie.

And it's only once Isaiah's sin is removed that he is able to hear the Lord ask what matters most: Whom shall I send? and to answer truly: I'll go; send me. Now the Lord will be able to use this teen-ager, who has seen and known God, to whom the Lord is now able to say: "go". Tell the people the truth about who God is.

And what is this young teen-ager supposed to say about this God who is so awesome that the only proper posture before Him is to fall on his face in fear? He's supposed to tell the people exactly what Isaiah himself has learned that day from God:

"Go, say to this people: You haven't heard a word that I was saying, have you? You're living a lie. You worship me and yet your hearts are far from me. You're successful, you're at peace; your enemies are far away... and you think that this is your doing. You are as proud in your hearts as King Uzziah was when he dared to enter my presence. Well, I'm telling you through this young teen-ager who stands before you that unless you repent, and are willing to have the charcoal from the Temple BBQ sear your lips, too, there is no hope."

Wow! That's a lot for a young teen to have placed on his shoulders! Go and tell your elders how far they have drifted from God. And when Isaiah asks God: how long, Lord, am I going to have to do this? God soberly tells him that his words are going to have very little effect if any: "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste." The only ones who do hear will be like the stumps of the terebinth and oak when they are cut down. That's all that will be left in the land. In other words, almost no one will listen to you, my son.

And that's exactly what happened. Before Isaiah reached middle-age, Israel to the north was destroyed and carried off into exile by the Assyrians. They never returned. The same thing happened to Judah shortly after Isaiah died: they were taken into exile by the Babylonians. Just a remnant of them, a stump, returned after 70 years during which their lips were constantly burned with fire. Only the faithful like Daniel survived the fiery flames of the Babylonian furnaces.

Yes, most of the people refused to hear the young man Isaiah, even as they would later refuse to hear a young man named Jesus, the very God present whom Isaiah had once seen, clothed now in the flesh of man. Had the people learned? Did they fall before Jesus as Isaiah had before God? A few did: some women, some sinners, the blind and the lame. But most didn't. In fact, most of his own eventually cried out for his murder! God's people still didn't have ears to hear. And so they perished, except again for a handful.

But out of that handful, that kept the word of God alive, a new people arose. And began to spread the word of the Lord across their land and then across the world. Their lips had been seared and they were battered and bruised but they held to one thing and one thing only: the Word of the Lord ... which as Isaiah wrote "remains forever". And that's who we are here this morning.

Well, young people here this morning, what do you think? Here is the story of two teen-agers: King Uzziah and the prophet Isaiah. They weren't really that different from you. We all have dreams of greatness. One became great and then became proud. The other was a relative nobody to whom God appeared and who was sent by God to warn people who were much older, much more successful and powerful than he would ever be, and to tell them to repent because God wanted much more of them than they were giving.

What about you here today? Let no one ever despise your youth. As young people you have energy and determination. Many of you also are willing to look stupid by falling on your faces before the Lord when you see Him as He is. You are the ones most likely to respond when God says: "Whom shall I send?"

What about us older people, maybe Uzziah's age when he was humbled? This morning's reading sounds a cautionary note: be careful when you become old and successful in what you have done, proud and thinking that you have done it all yourself and that God now owes you. It gets hard to remain faithful to God as you get older and as you think how much you've accomplished.

But, you know, the Holy Spirit also can do wonders with us older people, too. Remember what Peter said on the day of Pentecost, after his own lips had been seared and the falseness of his devotion to Jesus was revealed as he denied God three times. Ask Peter: did it hurt when his sins were cleansed? Oh man did it hurt. And he wept bitterly at the pain. But, now, 50 days after those events, Peter and 120 others were thrown out of their safe hiding into the streets of Jerusalem to proclaim again the truth to God's people. And Peter reminded them that what they were seeing was this: Young men seeing visions, old men dreaming dreams, the spirit being poured out on men and women. My friends, you and I are here this morning before the same almighty God and the Spirit is ready at any moment to blow open these doors and throw us into the world, the streets of our Jerusalem. Even now, the Lord is saying: Whom shall I send? Young or old, male or female, if you have truly known the Almighty God and His majesty, if you have recognized how false your worship of God has been and perhaps still often is, then you, too, will not fail to answer: Here am I Lord. Send me.