

Is it I, Lord?

Isaiah 6

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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. [a]
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."*

For almost two hundred years, the country had been divided. Under one king, the country had been powerful. Now, divided into two, it was easy prey for much greater powers living around them.

In the north, 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, there had been some bad kings, too, but recently here had been 40 years of relative peace under King Uzziah.

But King Uzziah was not we would call a good king. True, he had started off well. He lived righteously and built up the defences of the land.

But, once he had become successful, and the land was prospering under him, he became proud. And so he wanted the people to see that it was because of him that all these good things were happening. So he entered the Temple to offer incense to the Lord, something that was reserved for priests alone to do. But, the priests stood up against him, ready to defend the sanctity of the house of God. In fact, 80 priests stood ready to fight against the king to do so.

Uzziah was understandably angry. But, then, as he held the incenser in his hand, God stepped in and struck Uzziah with leprosy, or perhaps skin cancer, on his forehead. The priests rushed him out of the Temple so that he would not defile the Temple. From that day, until his death, king Uzziah was forced to live alone, cut off from his people, and from the Lord in His Temple.

In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah had a vision. Isaiah was a prophet, but from what we read in chapter 6, Isaiah knew the Temple well, something that only priests would have known, except for Uzziah who suffered the consequences of trespassing. So, Isaiah was not just a prophet, but also a priest of God.

Now, priests could go into the Temple, God's place of meeting with His people, because the priests were set apart, holy. If anyone was holy, it was a priest.

Yet, as Isaiah's vision makes clear to him that no one, not even a priest, is holy enough to be in God's presence.

What a vision it was! Isaiah actually sees the Lord, dressed with the vestments of king, accompanied by two of the highest ranks of angels. And these two living angels cry out with thunderous voices: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" while smoke fills the Temple.

What is the response of Isaiah, a prophet and a priest, the people's intercessor with God? (vs 5a): "Woe is me! for I am undone"

There may be some of us here who consider ourselves holy. Or maybe you think that I, as a pastor, think that I am supposed to be the most holy among you. Yet, how many of our prayers start "Woe is me"? I can tell you that most of mine don't. I assume that I am in the presence of God when I pray, as I imagine you do. But, is our experience that of Isaiah? I wonder if we really realize the One in whose presence we are? If we did, wouldn't we see ourselves as undone in the same way that Isaiah does? After all, he is a priest and one of the greatest prophets ever.

I know that it is not because we are absolutely fearless that we don't say "woe is me".

When I was 16 I went to Europe on what at that time was the second smallest ship crossing the Atlantic. We hit a gale the second day out of NY. I couldn't believe the size of the waves. I was so afraid. In another age, I might have said: Woe is me. What I actually said was closer to "We're goners!"

Think about our forefathers, crossing the ocean on even smaller ships than the one I was on. Think about their fears as they came up against storms and the massive waves that one still finds on the ocean and which still devastate ships. The great American sea-writer Herman Melville writes of the sea "[F]or ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder [man], and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make".¹ Men in Melville's day certainly said "Woe is me".

Even jetliners face storms and are not immune from their destructive power, especially the cumulus clouds of a thunderstorm that rise up 50,000 feet from the sea 5 miles into the air! "Woe is me!"

No, we do know fear. Those who have experienced the horror of earthly weather have often repeated Isaiah's words and still do to this day: "Woe is me! Who can come into the presence of something this powerful and survive."

¹ Cited in Nathaniel Philbrick, "Foreward," in *American Sea Writing: A Literary Anthology* (ed & introduced by Peter Neill; Library of America, Special Publication; NY: Forward, 2000), xvi-xvii.

But, Isaiah found himself in the presence of something even greater: not the sea, not the air, but the very presence of the God who is above both earth and heaven, the God who in fact created the heavens and the earth, and all that is in the universe.

My friends, it is indeed hard for us even to imagine what Isaiah saw, but Isaiah's word says it all: Woe! He knew where he was, and he knew that he could never survive this encounter. If some men and women could survive an encounter with the worst that the world could throw at them, no man or woman could survive an encounter with God.

In later centuries, the disciples of Jesus would realize something of this when they saw Jesus walking across the storm tossed sea toward them and feared more what they saw than the sea itself: Woe! It is what Peter, James and John felt on the mountain when they saw Jesus transfigured from his human form into pure Godliness before them and they were exceedingly afraid: Woe! It was what happened to the Roman soldiers who had come to the Garden to find and arrest Jesus, who turned to them and said "I am" and they all, without exception, and fell to the ground in fear: Woe!

This was Isaiah's experience. Woe is me!

When Isaiah could speak again, he cried out (vs 5b): "[Woe is me] because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

Why does he associate his uncleanness with "unclean lips"? Because the "lips" are the gate in and out of the body. The "lips" allow in what is clean or unclean, but they also let out what is clean or unclean, and so they reveal what is in the heart. And what Isaiah says here is that what his lips, and those of his people, reveal, is that they are all unclean, unworthy, and definitely not able to be present to the Lord. Only what is holy and perfectly cleansed can come into the presence of God; what is impure and unholy will be destroyed, and burned by fire, which will either consume it or leave what is purified behind.

And that is exactly what happens here. I continue in the King James version for vs 6 and 7: "Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged."

You have to imagine the altar in the Temple as something like a massive BBQ, with red-hot coals. It was used to consume the offerings laid upon it. Any fleshly thing that touched one of the coals would be consumed with a sizzle and smoke.

Now, in his vision, Isaiah sees the angel take one of those coals with tongs and bring it to his lips to burn away the impurity of his lips. Even though he doesn't dwell on it, you have to believe that this was not a pleasant experience. In fact, imagine the pain! You know what I'm talking about. You'd be stupid to try this at home. But, it took away his guilt and his sin. Lo, "thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged".

You and I know of a much greater taking away of sin, one that didn't just remove sin from one man but removed sin from all men and women for all time. Yet you and I didn't feel any searing pain when our sin was taken from us. Why? Because our Lord took upon Himself not only the sin but also the pain of taking the sin! Lo, our guilt and sin have been taken away.

Woe! Lo! Now what?

For Isaiah, as for us, the answer is the same: after being cleansed, Isaiah was able to hear the Lord speak to him directly, not just the angels (vs 8): "I heard the voice of the Lord". As the letter to the Hebrews tells us, when our sin is taken away we no longer need to rely on messengers to speak of God to us; we can actually come directly into God's presence and hear God speak.

But, toward what end? Is Isaiah's sin removed just so that could relax and listen to the Lord's voice? Is ours?

No, Isaiah's sin was removed so that he could hear what the Lord wants him to do (vss 8-9): "I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. And he said, Go.."

Isaiah's "woe" at his sinful presence in God's sight became the announcement to him that "lo" your sin is forgiven. And so now, he is told by the Lord Himself, "go". 'Go forth from my presence to proclaim my word to my people who cannot receive it directly from Me because they are not holy. You have been cleansed of your sin; you can now take my word to them.'

At some point in our lives, we who have had ears to hear have found ourselves in the presence of the Lord and have been aware of our sinfulness. We are still realizing how sinful we are, but we have at least realized this much: that we are not acceptable to God as we are and nothing that we can do can make us acceptable to God. But, we know that God has come to us and has taken our sin away by taking it upon Himself. In doing so, He has made us clean. And He has done so not so that we can sit back and relax but so that we can go

Isaiah said: "Here am I; send me." God said: "Go". But, go and say what? Words of comfort? Words of peace? Good news?

Vss 9-10, again from the King James: “Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.”

In other words, Isaiah has a very difficult task. His job is to go to the people to confirm what Isaiah has himself learned about himself, namely, their sinfulness, their lack of holiness, and their impurity.

Now, perhaps you have said to this point: everything that you have said about Isaiah is true of us, too. In the presence of God, we can only say “Woe”; and, in His faithfulness God has cleansed us, “Lo”, by something greater than a coal from the altar, by the blood of the lamb. And it is true that God sends us: “Go”.

But, surely it is to proclaim not the bad news of people’s sinfulness but the Good News of release from sin. Maybe in the Old Testament this was necessary, but we live in the New.

Yet, in the heart of the NT, in the Gospel itself, it was these words from Isaiah that our Lord spoke to his disciples as the reason for the way He preached to the people. After the parable of the sower in Mark 4 (9-12), Jesus says to the crowd “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” [Then] when he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”

What Isaiah was to say to the people, what Jesus was saying to the people, what we are to say to the people, is indeed Good News, because then, as now, some of them, like Isaiah himself, would indeed have “ears to hear” and would understand what they were hearing: that the problem is not God; the problem is us. Those people who do hear the message that Isaiah was being sent out to speak, the message that Jesus proclaimed, and the message that we are to proclaim, will, like Isaiah and like us, say to themselves: Woe is us. We are undone. For we are not worthy to come into God’s presence.”

Many -- in Isaiah’s and Jesus’ day “most -- will refuse to hear. When Isaiah asks God for how long he is going to have to preach this message, the Lord tells him (vss 11-13): “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. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.”

This is just what was going to happen. In fact, within a mere 20 years, the northern part of the kingdom that had separated itself off, would cease to be, conquered by a powerful people from the East, and all its inhabitants taken into exile to become slaves or to be married off to strange people. And just over a hundred years later, the same thing would happen to the southern part of David’s kingdom, which would be taken into a 70-year exile. For hundreds of years, there would be but a stump remaining. Most of God’s people didn’t have ears to hear.

Within 40 years of Jesus’ preaching, Jerusalem would be destroyed. Less than 100 years later, the Jews would be cast out of their homeland for almost 2000 years and forced to wander homeless. Most of God’s people didn’t have ears to hear.

What about us? Even as Christians we have seen kingdoms rise and fall, wars that have made a mockery of our confession of Jesus as Prince of Peace. We have seen too many individuals and peoples ignore the proclamation of God and reap the results, too many who do not have ears to hear.

But, some will hear. There will always be some, fewer or more, but always some, who see what Isaiah saw, what Jesus knew, and what we are told.

As a result, our work is not done. To those who have seen the Lord and have realized their own sinfulness, and who have also been cleansed from sin by God, God still says “Go”.

But, you may say: me? Do you want me to go, Lord? Is it I, Lord, that you are calling? We look around and perhaps think: don’t you mean the pastor! He’ll do it. Or we think: don’t you mean one of the elders? Or we think: don’t you mean him, he’s so much better at talking about God than I am?

No, I mean you. The prophet Joel announced that one day even those who had never prepared to speak the word would be sent like Isaiah.

As Christians we believe that that happened on the day of Pentecost, when those who wanted to follow Jesus were overcome, by the Spirit of God. Those who had no preparation or training were equipped by the Spirit to proclaim the Word, the same word that

was given to Isaiah.

So today: in answer to the question: "Is it I, Lord?", if you are aware that you are a sinner, impure and unholy in God's sight, someone who could only say "Woe" in the presence of God, and if you have been made clean, Lo, by the blood of the Lamb -- in other words, if you are a Christian -- then, yes, it is you to whom God says "Go": Go in the power of the Holy Spirit and tell what you have seen. Tell it to your friends and those with whom you work; tell it to your grandchildren and to your parents; tell it to someone you think needs to hear it and to someone who you think probably already knows it all. But, above all, go.