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“Shaking the Foundations”

Isaiah 6:1-8 (NRSV)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. [2] Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. [3] And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
 the whole earth is full of his glory."

[4] The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. [5] And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

[6] Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. [7] The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." [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!"

KING UZZIAH

The most important phrase in our lesson for today is that opening statement, “In the year that King Uzziah died ...”

Most of us haven’t heard much about King Uzziah. But, in his time King Uzziah played a very important role in the history of the southern kingdom, Judah.

Uzziah ruled for fifty two years. And he was a very good king. When he began his rule, the country was in deep trouble militarily and politically. But, during his long and able rule Uzziah was able to revive the economy and bring his country success on the battlefield. There was an air of confidence and hope in Judah.

But, sometimes success breeds complacency, and this seems to have been the case with Uzziah and his nation. Toward the end of his life Uzziah tried to claim an authority that was not his own when he made his own incense offering in the temple. According to the Bible he contracted leprosy as punishment for his actions and was forced to live a life of isolation. This was a harbinger of things to come.

When King Uzziah died, there was a great void in leadership. The death of King Uzziah was a turning point in the history of the southern kingdom, Judah. I'm sure that everyone suspected that after King Uzziah died nothing would ever be the same again.

In order to understand this passage in modern terms we might think of some life changing events that have happened in our era. Imagine that our passage for today began: in the year that Pearl Harbor was attacked ... in the year that the stock market crashed ... in the year that terrorists attacked the World Trade Center ... in the year that President Kennedy was assassinated.

That gives you a sense of how the people felt about the year that King Uzziah died.

From time to time there are great events that change the course of history. From time to time the foundations of our world are shaken, and we are forced to re-evaluate everything.

Of course this also happens on a personal level as well. We remember the year when our special loved one died. We remember the year when we lost our job. We remember the year when an important relationship ended.

It was that kind of year when Isaiah received his call. The country of Judah had enjoyed a long period of prosperity, but the death of Uzziah marked the end of an era.

Trouble brewed on the horizon like a great desert storm. The Assyrians with their great military might were on a rampage. Judah would soon be pressured by Syria and Israel to join an ill advised conflict against the Assyrians.

When King Uzziah died it was a very scary time for the people of Judah. It was a time of uncertainty and even panic.

A NEW VISION NEEDED

And it was precisely at a time like this that a prophet was needed. A prophet was someone who could help people accept the end of the old way of life and embrace something new.

In this uncertain time what the people really needed was not a new king. They needed a renewed understanding of who they were as a people and what they were called to do. They needed a vision of that holy God who saved them and called them to be His chosen people. This was something that they had lost over the years.

When God first led his people out of slavery in the land of Egypt, they were unique among the peoples of the ancient world. Their nation was not based primarily upon

economic and military strength. Their nation was based upon trust in God's word and God's care.

God was their king. They were a new kind of community, what some have called a theocracy. They were God's people, and they waited on the Lord for their salvation.

But, as God's people became settled in the Promised Land their trust in God began to waiver. They began to long for a king ... an earthly king. They wanted to be like all the other nations who surrounded them. They wanted to protect themselves by investing in military spending and having a strong leader to deliver them in the time of crisis.

God's people got their wish. They got their earthly king, but their hunger for security had a high price.

No longer would they have a community based upon the compassion and justice of a loving God. Now they would be under the absolute rule of earthly monarchs, many of whom cared nothing for God or God's people.

This led to many military misadventures and to economic injustice. And it also led to theological error as well. Instead of the radically free and mysterious God who commanded their every movement they now had a God who was "on call" for their king. Divine justice was replaced with royal privilege.

As Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggeman put it, "God and his temple became part of the royal landscape, in which the sovereignty of God was fully subordinated to the purpose of the king."

I think that something similar often happens today. The sovereignty of God is often subordinated to our needs and desires. Our "god" becomes too small. We use the word "god" but we are no longer listening for the voice of the Almighty. God and king (or in our case God and country) become synonymous. And theology just becomes a matter of trying to justify what we already believe and want.

AN AWESOME GOD

But, God loves us too much to leave us in our sinful delusion. God shakes the foundations of our neatly ordered world. And we learn with the prophet that the awesome God who created the universe is way too big for our little temple.

I have found that during a time of transition and uncertainty people are often more open to things spiritual. During a time of transition and uncertainty people talk less and listen more. They long for a word of hope. They long for vision that comes from above and beyond their little world.

I often see this openness and longing when I do a funeral. People who had little interest in God or God's will suddenly are ready to listen very carefully to the gospel message. When our foundations are shaken, we make our way to God's house in search of an answer.

Perhaps this was why Isaiah went to the temple long ago. In a time of personal and national peril, the prophet wanted answers. But in that temple the prophet got more than answers. The prophet got an overwhelming vision of the Almighty, the Holy One, the Creator of the universe.

And that vision of a sovereign holy God was the foundation of his ministry to God's people for the rest of his life. Once you see the Lord high and lifted up you life will never be the same.

The Bible tells us that the just the hem of God's garment filled the temple. That's a poetic way of saying that the one true God could not be contained in Israel's temple. The temple was more than just the religious arm of the state.

The temple pointed to the one true God who was above and beyond anything the people could imagine. God could not be contained by their temple or by anyone's temple for that matter.

The story is told of a man who had just been elected to the British Parliament. He brought his family to London and was giving them a tour of the city. When he entered Westminster Abbey his eight year old daughter seemed awestruck by the size and beauty of the structure.

Her proud father was curious about what was going on in her mind and asked, "What are you thinking about?" The little girl replied, "Daddy, I was just thinking about how big you are in our house, but how small you look here!"

One of the reasons we need to come to church and worship is to get a Divine sense of perspective. We might seem big in our house, but in God's house, in the presence of the Holy One we seem very small indeed.

EXAMPLES OF GOD'S POWER

In our lesson for today this vision of a large, mysterious and holy God is further amplified by the appearance of these six winged creatures, the seraphim. The job of these formidable creatures is to proclaim the glory of God.

But, even these fiery messengers of heaven are overwhelmed by the awesomeness of God's power. That's why they had two extra sets of wings. They needed those wings to veil their bodies and their eyes from the holiness of God's presence.

During Advent we sing a hymn that really helps us get a sense of this holy scene, "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence." That hymn is written in haunting minor key, and its words really give me a sense of God's holiness.

"Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand." And then the last line goes, "At his feet the six winged seraph; Cherubim, with sleepless eye, Veil their faces to the presence, as with ceaseless voice they cry ... Alleluia, Lord Most High."

I sometimes think that we need to sing that song throughout the year. More than any other hymn it paints a musical picture of this awesome and holy God revealed in Isaiah's vision.

Another good way to get a sense of the might and power of God is to study science, especially astronomy. I know that the relationship between science and religion has not always been a good one.

But, I happen to believe that scientists can help us grasp a vision of the one true God who is high and lifted up, the God whose glory fills not only the earth but also the entire universe. Scientists can help us learn what the Bible means when it says, "the heavens are telling the glory of God."

Nearly 200 years before Christ an astronomer catalogued about 850 stars. He thought that this was the total number and some 300 years later his figures were still considered accurate. But, with the invention of the telescope millions of the heavenly bodies could be viewed, that the world soon learned that the earlier counts were much too small.

Today we can't even hazard a guess as to how many stars there are in the universe. Astronomers estimate that an average of 100 billion stars is found in a single galaxy, and that 10 billion galaxies are within the range of our largest telescopes.

The Hubble Telescope has shown us star nurseries that existed billions of years ago just after the creation of the universe. Can you imagine such a thing? The Universe is so large that we are literally looking into the primordial past when we look at these scenes.

When I look at such astonishing sights I am indeed awestruck. There is a sense of just how small I am and just how big God is. I think of what the Psalmist wrote long ago,

"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Psalm 8:3-4 (NRSV)

The more we learn about God's universe the more we can appreciate this vision of a God who cannot be contained in any way by our little categories.

WOE IS ME

I am comforted by the awesomeness of God's vision, but I am also disturbed by it as well. In the presence of such a holy and powerful creator God there is a sense of unworthiness. As the Psalmist put it why should a God like this be concerned with us? We are nothing but a cosmic speck, a brief blip on the great universal timetable.

That's why a vision of God is so frightening. In Isaiah's vision, when the seraphim proclaim the holiness of God, there is an earthquake in the temple. The foundations of the temple shake and the whole place is filled with smoke.

When we receive a vision of the one true God, the foundations of our temple will always shake. When we get a true glimpse of God and what God wants us to do our most cherished beliefs will be challenged. There will be a heightened sense of our own sinfulness and unworthiness. The foundation of our life will be shaken.

That's how it was for Isaiah. He responded to God's presence by saying, "Woe is me! 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."

That statement of course is very reminiscent of what the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." In the presence of God even the best person's good works are like (as the prophet would later put it) filthy rags. (cf. Isaiah 64:6)

POWERFUL REDEEMER

But, God does not choose to leave us in our sin. The Scripture tells us that his awesome, holy creator God chooses to reach out to his prophet and his people. God sends his messenger, one of the seraphim with a live coal from the altar of God's presence. And as the heavenly messenger touches the lips of the prophet with this coal he proclaims,

"Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Isaiah 6:7 (NRSV)

You'll remember that in the temple, sacrifices and burnt offerings were made as atonement for sin. In this vision we see that in heaven there is a perpetual fire of sacrifice where atonement is made by a gracious God for an unworthy people.

To put it another way, once again we see that the heart of God is filled with love. God is not out to get us. God is not out to give us what we deserve. Thank God for that! God is out to forgive us. God is out to take away our sins.

God does not want us to be held hostage by the guilt of past wrongs or our fears about the future. God wants us to move forward with hope. God leads us into a future that is (in the final analysis) determined only by His gracious choice.

SEND ME

God's forgiveness always leads to reconciliation. The prophet who was overwhelmed with a sense of shame and sinfulness in the presence of God is now enabled to bring a message of hope to his people. The man who was deaf to the majesty of God and unable to speak a word of hope is now changed into a powerful spokesman for the kingdom.

When Isaiah hears the Lord asking, "Whom shall I send?" this fearful reluctant prophet finds the courage to speak up and say, "Here am I. Send me."

The one thing that allows me to move forward in life and to respond positively to God's call is this assurance: the throne of the Holy, All Powerful King of Kings is also a throne of grace.

The Psalmist wrote that God does not "deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." Instead, God takes away our sins as far as the East is from the West. (cf. Psalm 103:10-12)

TRINITY SUNDAY

Today is Trinity Sunday, that Sunday when we celebrate the fact that the one God is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Though this doctrine is not spelled out explicitly in Scripture, it is implied throughout.

For example, in today's lesson we see that the same all powerful God who is high and lifted up is also the God who sends a word of forgiveness down to earth. And this God also sends a messenger to all the people so that they might have hope and a new direction in a time of upheaval.

The connection is not a direct one. But, I can understand why we have this passage in the lectionary as a part of Trinity Sunday. The Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer theme song has been God's song from the very beginning. With the seraphim we also sing today "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty ... God in three persons, blessed Trinity."

More than that, today in the Lord's Supper we get our own special vision of God. This God is not only high and lifted up. This God is also down to earth. He comes to us in His Son, Jesus.

This Jesus is the hot coal from the heavenly altar. His sacrifice touches our lips and our hearts. In him we are forgiven and freed. His body is broken for us. His blood is shed for us.

The presence of God automatically reminds us that we are sinful creatures who fall short of what we are called to be. But, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world comes to us in Jesus. And the Spirit of God in Christ enables us to move forward even when the times are uncertain and the way forward is not clear.

The mystery of the Trinity, the essence of God's Person is not a mystery to be solved and understood. It is a holy mystery that deepens and develops over time.

Just as the universe has proved to be more and more complex as our knowledge has increased; so I think that the more we understand the power and grace of God the more we will be overwhelmed in wonder and awe.

Some people find this a reason to despair. They want to explain God completely.

But, I find it a reason to celebrate. I believe that in the eternal Mystery of God there is salvation and hope. There is a message and a purpose that continues beyond our little lives and even beyond space and time.

Have the foundations of your temple been shaken recently? Are you afraid of what might happen next in your world? I invite you to join in the biblical vision. Come into the temple of grace and hope and bow before the Creator of all that is. There is much more to God's world than any of us have dreamed of. And today He invites us to hear and spread that Word.

Amen.