

**February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

**Isaiah 6:1-8 “Are You Sure You’re Ready For This?”**

Back in the mid-2000s, “user friendly” church was a hot topic. At the time, churches were in the middle of an almost three-decade-long decline as far as attendance and participation goes. So church growth experts were coming up with all these strategies to either grow churches or at least slow down the decline. There was a trend in many churches to do whatever you could to make sure people felt comfortable and at home in worship. Especially those who would otherwise feel uncomfortable in church. There were all sorts of buzzwords that were floating around at the time like, “Seeker Friendly” and “Emergent.” The idea was that the church shouldn’t make folks feel any more uncomfortable than putting their feet up at home and watching television. Not everyone jumped on board that train though, and even the ones who did weren’t able to stabilize the decline. As I mentioned back in January, the decline had everything to do with the church’s hypocrisy and obsession with partisan politics. You didn’t have to get up out of your couch to see that.

Then something happened in March of 2020. March 17 to be exact. A little-bitty microscopic virus hit the pause button on normal, and the world stopped in its tracks. All of a sudden, the church was forced to change their

strategy because their members *had to* stay home ... sometimes in front of a screen often in their couches with their feet up! If the church was going to continue its mission and witness to the world ... if the church was going to continue to be a worshipping community ... we *had to* find a way to help people feel comfortable in worship at home! Many churches did not have the technology to reach out to their members. And if they did, a lot of their members didn't have the technology to receive it. A problem that Anglicans, Lutherans, Catholics and other traditions that have strict and specific rituals for receiving weekly communion found themselves in a pickle too. Even if they had the technology to reach their members and even if their members had the technology to receive, their hands were tied because only a priest could bless the eucharist. Councils and diocese and other decision-making bodies were convened over Zoom to discuss and sometimes argue over whether someone could take or receive communion from home. Then when churches started to meet again there were restrictions on how to take communion. The single "Common Cup" that everyone drank from was out of the picture. So what do you do? To top it all off, there were restrictions on singing and other elements of worship. The question many faced was, "Is our worship faithful to the biblical picture of what worship should be, or are we failing to be what God wants us to be as a worshipping community?" Fortunately, our scripture this morning is a

classic text that the church has been using for centuries to develop a biblical understanding for worship. Apparently, all we need is a throne in a smoke-filled room, an altar filled with live coals and some multi-winged creatures who remove the coals from the altar to touch the lips of the worshippers. Or we can have wi-fi, a camera, and a Zoom and FaceBook account.

According to our text, the prophet Isaiah had a vision of God while he was in the temple. We don't know if Isaiah was alone in the temple or whether it was during a public gathering. Whatever it was, Isaiah had a vision of God but he struggled to describe exactly what he saw. It's always hard to describe the indescribable, but clearly one of the things that struck him was how different God was from us. He speaks of God as being high and lifted-up and enormous. And surrounding God were these awesome fiery creatures called seraphs or "seraphim" in Hebrew. They were chanting, "Holy! Holy! Holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of God's glory."

Isaiah's vision of God didn't seem to be confined to the Temple either. God couldn't fit in the temple and the vision spilled out to fill the whole earth with God's glory. Here's something you need to know – visions of God are rare in scripture. Most of the time, people hide their faces in the presence of God or God appears as something "other" like a burning bush. Visions of God are a gift. But

was Isaiah *ready* for this gift? This kind of vision generally only comes to those who put serious time and energy into prayerfully focusing their attention on God. When people “do the work” of seeking God, some see beyond the surface realities of life to see the deepest truths of the universe.

The impact of this vision on Isaiah is about as “user friendly” as a freight train crashing through your living room wall. At first Isaiah feels like he’s in an earthquake. The whole building begins to shake and fill with smoke. At that moment, Isaiah feels like the ground will open up and swallow him. He is overcome by the awesomeness of God which fills the whole earth and makes the ground shake beneath him. Isaiah falls down thinking that he’s going to die. Here he is, face to face with this awesome God surrounded by seraphim announcing God’s holiness. Isaiah feels like he’s standing naked and exposed. And he is suddenly aware of all sorts of things he doesn’t like about himself. Have you ever been in that place? Where the playlist of all the foolish things you’ve ever said and done in your life are stuck on repeat? Where all you can think about is how you’ve failed or how unworthy you are of any good thing that’s ever happened to you? Or worse; where you feel like you deserve every bad thing that’s ever happened to you? That’s how Isaiah felt. He felt painfully aware of his own scuminess in the presence of such awesome holiness. He felt like he walked naked into

a blazing furnace. “This is it. I’m done for. I can’t open my mouth without exposing myself as the fraud I am, and the same is true of everyone I know; yet here I am, naked before the all-consuming holiness of God.”

But he does survive. He survives by the gift of God. God sends one of the seraphs to take a live coal from the altar and touch Isaiah’s lips. Having faced his own sinfulness, Isaiah is now faced with the even more awesome prospect of forgiveness. Then suddenly Isaiah’s guilt is gone. That awful playlist of all his life’s failures has stopped. This is not a user friendly, “hey, don’t worry about it little camper, it’s all good,” kind of thing. This is being dropped into the abyss and pulled back out right as you think you’re done for. And having been touched by the burning coal of forgiveness, Isaiah now hears God speak for the first time: “Whom shall I send? Is there anyone who will go on our behalf?” And Isaiah responds by offering himself: “Here I am. Send me!” And so God commissions Isaiah for his task as a preacher and prophet; to preach to a people who will refuse to hear and will ignore God’s word all the way to their own destruction.

Now can you see why this story is used so often to describe worship? Can you see how Isaiah’s experience follows the pattern of what we do in worship? Let me help you a bit. In our worship, we approach God who is the biggest mystery imaginable. The God who is beyond

what we can envision or describe. And as we approach, we become aware of how far we fall short of the holiness of the God who searches us and knows us. In the face of what seems like a consuming fire, all we can do is say, “Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers.” And then, as a forgiven people, we hear the Word of God through scriptures that always beg the question, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” Then we respond by offering our time, talents and resources to accomplish God’s mission and witness to this broken world.

Finally, we gather around the table of thanksgiving to become what we receive at this table – the body of Christ. And as the body of Christ we are sent out into the world to proclaim the good news of God’s love and forgiveness. But we are sent out knowing that the good news we proclaim will likely fall on deaf ears. But we do it anyway because we’re faithful. Isaiah lived that story, and we reenact it every week so that we might be drawn into it and live it too.

A few years ago I had a conversation with an acquaintance who was about my age. They hadn’t been to church for years and after a little coaxing, they visited our church. Here’s the thing, though, the conversation I had with this person is a conversation that I’ve had on several occasions over the years with different acquaintances and sometimes even close friends. At some point in their

lives, they left the church for reasons ranging from severe spiritual and emotional abuse to, “I just couldn’t stand the sound of the preacher’s voice.” But they will say, “Your church is different though. You’re not all hellfire and brimstone and guilt-tripping like a lot of churches. Your folks are so genuine. They don’t act like they’re better than everyone else. You all focus on what the Bible says instead of spending all your time talking about how awful gay people are and how you should vote. You challenge folks to get out of their comfort zones to see the world differently and to be more loving and forgiving because God forgives us. You all really stand out as far as churches go.” And I’ll say, “Well there’s always a place for you here. Like we say, ‘All are welcome and all means all.’” And they’ll say something like, “I just can’t do it. I don’t think I’m able to get over the hurt I still feel when I think of my past church experiences. I don’t think I could ever change, and I’m not sure I even *want* to. Don’t get me wrong, I admire your church, I like your people and I like and support the ministry you do in the community. I just don’t think I can be a part of a church who says ‘Agree to differ, resolve to love and unite to serve’ because I don’t think I can live up to that expectation.”

And I’m left thinking, “Okay, they came to church. They said they liked our people. They even liked the way we do ministry.” Maybe it’s like one of those online dating

experiences when one person says to the other, “It’s not you, it’s me” even though they’re thinking, “Yeah, it’s definitely you.” I don’t know. But in those cases, there usually isn’t very much said about the “why.” And I don’t think it’s because we try to make people feel “at home” in worship. In fact, thank you, folks who have been coming via Zoom and FaceBook for hanging in there. We love and appreciate you.

I’m not sure that I care that much about numbers, nice as they might be. But I do want to make sure that we have worship experiences that impact us as much as the encounter Isaiah had with God. And I’m not talking all the scary things Isaiah saw in his vision. But I do want our encounter with God to be one where we discover that we are loved and forgiven and that we are transformed into the hands and feet of God in the world. “Holy! Holy! Holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of God’s glory.”