

Sermon – November 15; Text: [Isaiah 6:1-8](#) (clicking on the link will take you to the reading on Biblegateway)

The hymn of the day today is Here I Am Lord. It's probably one of the most popular of what might be considered newer Christian songs...newer meaning the composer isn't dead yet. It's kind of a feel good song. Here I am Lord echoes Isaiah's response to God's question – whom shall I send?

It kind of raises a romanticized image of sharing God's love in words and actions...feeding the hungry, tending the sick...and maybe being rewarded with gratitude, or at least a feeling of satisfaction.

The prophet's call never looks like that.

Prophets are people chosen by God to speak the truth to God's people. It's typically not a popular feel good truth.

In fact, that message for Isaiah and the other pre-exile prophets would be mostly devastating

Before I say more about Isaiah, let's take a brief look at the history since last week's story.

We left David with a promise from God that a descendant of David would always rule over Israel. David's son Solomon was the next king. Solomon reigned during the peak of Israel's power and prosperity. Solomon was known for his wisdom.

Some of that wisdom he used to play a very shrewd political game. He had hundreds of wives...marriages largely arranged for the purpose of establishing peaceful relationships with the surrounding nations.

Solomon wasn't as faithful to God as his father was – he worshipped foreign idols, again as a part of his political savvy.

After Solomon's reign, his son was a disaster. The kingdom of Israel fell apart. It divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

Over the following centuries, there were a handful of good kings, mostly in Judah. But most of the kings were corrupt and unfaithful. Israel's call to be a blessing for the world instead became a sad joke.

God was heartbroken and angry.

In the five chapters leading up to this scene at the throne of God, God's vision is laid out for Isaiah. It's not a pretty one. Listen to this from the 3rd chapter:

The LORD rises to argue his case;
he stands to judge the peoples.

¹⁴The LORD enters into judgment
with the elders and princes of his people:

It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the Lord charges
the spoil of the poor is in your houses.

¹⁵What do you mean by crushing my people,
by grinding the face of the poor?

Isaiah's vision imagines a court room scene. Judah is the defendant and God is the prosecutor...and the judge. Judah is guilty.

And what exactly are they guilty of? This is a very consistent message throughout all the prophets:

- They are guilty of idol worship

- They failed to care for the poor and even exploited them
- They were guilty of arrogance and a lifestyle that favored the accumulation of excessive wealth and showing it off.
- They are guilty of assuming that all they needed to do was worship properly and they'd be good with God. Their worship didn't impact how they lived.

Then in Isaiah's vision, God lays out the judgement plan. God will use the surrounding powerful nations to punish Israel and Judah. The land and cities will be destroyed and the people carried into exile.

That's the message Isaiah is to deliver. How popular will that be? How popular would it be if someone told us the United States was going to fall because of idolatry, worship of wealth, and failure to care for the poor?

Not very.

And what's more, God tells Isaiah the people aren't going to listen. In fact, it seems God doesn't really want them to...God is done with them.

Now, face to face with God, Isaiah is stricken to the core. God's presence here is not comforting. Isaiah is face to face with the God whose anger and sorrow over the rebellion of his people are overwhelming.

In an instant, Isaiah can see it all. He sees where the people have gone wrong. He sees what he's done wrong. He sees how Israel has utterly failed to be the people God wanted them to be for the sake of the world. Surely he's about to die.

But then an amazing thing happens. One of the seraphs grabbed a pair of tongs and took one of the burning coals from the altar. The seraph touches Isaiah's lips. In that instant, Isaiah's guilt is lifted and his sin blotted out.

Overwhelmed, when God says...hmmm...who should we send? Isaiah says me! me! I'll go!

The burning coal acted as a purifying fire. Isaiah is cleansed. God has prepared him for the task ahead.

Based on scripture and some sources outside the Bible, King Uzziah died around 740 BC. Isaiah's prophetic movement that began that year was aimed at the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital – Jerusalem. At the time Assyria was the superpower threatening the region.

As it turned out, the northern Kingdom of Israel did fall to Assyria. Judah did not.

Babylon would be Judah's downfall 150 years later. Isaiah's prophecies of destruction and exile would eventually prove true.

OK, so why should we care about Isaiah, or any of the prophets for that matter? What could these fiery preachers who have been dead for over 2500 years possibly have to say to us?

And for that matter, isn't this kind of a troubling image of God?

It is. But it makes it pretty clear that God takes this stuff seriously. When God's people fail to act with justice towards the poor, when God's people pursue wealth and power to make a name for themselves instead of modeling life with God, when God's people put their trust in other gods, that will have consequences.

But even in the midst of judgement, God works to bring the people to something new. The burning coal touched to Isaiah's lips serves as a metaphor for the whole exile as a purifying fire for Judah.

See, this judgement against Judah wasn't eternal. Alongside the prophesies of judgement from Isaiah...and virtually every other prophet...is a promise for a hopeful future.

Judah will not be totally destroyed, but will be purified. They'll have a chance to return to Judah ready to be the people God established them to be. They will begin again.

The next thing this scene this says to us, is that God's presence doesn't always comfort. Sometimes God's presence serves as a mirror for us to see ourselves face to face.

God's presence can force us to see where we've gone astray, where we've sold ourselves short, where we've not loved our neighbors...nor really loved ourselves.

We can see the things that stand in our way of answering God's call. Then God takes those things away. Like a burning coal, that isn't supposed to be comfortable. But God will make us ready to stand before the altar and receive our mission.

And finally, throughout all the prophetic books, something new begins to emerge. The exile is the last time in scripture that God acts directly to punish.

Throughout the Old Testament there's a tension between God's love, God's heartbreak over Israel's faithlessness, and God's judgement. As the story moves through the fall of Israel and Judah and the exile, a new vision begins to take shape.

The prophets begin to speak of the hope and expectation for a new king, a messiah. The prophets announce a future messianic kingdom – or as Jesus called it, the kingdom of God.

The book of Isaiah is filled with some of the most beautiful passages in the bible. The ones where swords are beaten into plowshares and the lion and the lamb sleep side by side....ones that describe a feast at God's table and a powerful Prince of Peace. More passages from Isaiah are quoted in the New Testament than any other Old Testament book.

And Isaiah makes up a big chunk of Handel's Messiah whose 8 part harmonies ring in my head when I read it.

In the time of the prophets, King Hezekiah, a reformer, was thought to be that promised good king.

But we see something different. We see a messiah who will be the very embodiment of God...a messiah who will be the suffering servant a second Isaiah describes later in the book. We see Isaiah pointing to Jesus.

But for now let's go back and join Isaiah in the throne room of God.

In a time of silence, examine what God might want us to see about ourselves, the church, our communities and nation? What stands in our way of being a blessing for the world? What in us needs to be burned away?

After that silence, we'll be ready to sing Here I am Lord...if you dare.

