

Isaiah: 2. Experiencing God

Isaiah 6:1-13

March 2, 2012

Pastor Steve Richards

On a bright, fresh Sunday morning, in a church not unlike this one, a man walks into the sanctuary and finds a seat. His business is failing. It is not in a free fall, not yet, but it's struggling enough to keep him working long hours and lying awake through the night. On the other side of the sanctuary comes a woman who asked her husband to move out the night before. She is terrified and full of grief at what she's done. She's worried about what the right next steps might be. There is a couple who sit holding hands, although they can't see their linked arms through their tears. They lost their third pregnancy that week and all either of them could think about was her phone call to him from the hospital, so much hope crushed once again. And there is a widower sitting way in the back, who for the past week had eaten every meal by himself and wanted more than anything to shake someone's hand and hear another voice. All of them come, just as you have come, into the sanctuary – a place made holy by prayers and songs and words of faith – to be still and wonder if the God of history is real, if the God they cannot see could be real to us.

Seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, a man named Isaiah wondered. It was the year that King Uzziah died, a king who at first had shown promise, a king who was faithful to God until his power increased and then God was forgotten. Now the nation is at risk and preparations for war. Last Sunday we heard the list of charges that God had leveled against the people of Judah. It was not just the king but an entire nation that had forsaken God – and when they worshipped God, it was not heart-felt, not real. The people did not see God as an answer to anything. God was not real. God needed a messenger, and that day when Isaiah entered the temple no one was more surprised than Isaiah to discover God.

Here's how Isaiah describes what happened. (Isaiah 6:1-4) ***I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. 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. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.*** If you and I had been there with him, it is unlikely that we would have seen what Isaiah saw. This was Isaiah's moment. It was his experience of God, the Holy One of Israel. Several years ago, with others from this church I entered the Sistine Chapel in Rome, a sanctuary rich in history, every inch covered with artistic magnificence. It was packed with people standing shoulder to shoulder moving slowly from one end of the sanctuary to the other and like everyone around me I looked up. In looking up, at first I saw the wonder of Michelangelo's artistry, but then I saw something more than what could be seen. And that was the Holy One of Israel. I've felt that here. I enter seeking something that I cannot give myself. I enter and look up. For Isaiah, the outlook was bleak. The king had died, the nation was at risk and

he was powerless. But he looked up. And if that's where you are – where something in your life is not right, the outlook is bleak, and you are powerless in the face of what is happening, take a lesson from Isaiah and look up. God is ready. Your experience will not look like Isaiah's experience, but if you are ready, God will be...real. When your world is falling down around you, look up – that's what we do here – look up to see from heaven's point of view.

And from heaven's point of view, what Isaiah saw was himself. ***“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined!*** Isaiah is in this place he did not expect – where God is more real than he knew possible and his first response is to say, “I have been found out. What I've been carrying deep within me has been found out.” ***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.***” Unclean lips are caused by an unclean heart. Jesus would say, “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” I am not who I ought to be and not who I want to be. I am a sinner in the presence of the only one who can make me right, make me clean again. Lord have mercy on me.

And God answers Isaiah's prayer, taking a “live coal” from the altar – God does what only God can do. ***With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”*** It's not that God would take a red hot coal and press it to Isaiah's lips, but in this moment of the holy, this moment when he recognized his own need, his own failure, faults and wounds, God makes it right. His sin removed. His guilt taken away. And only when he is cleansed and made right does he hear the voice of the Lord: ***Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”*** We are cleansed, forgiven, made right – for a purpose. We may enter here with the weight of the past week and when we are ready, God will remove that weight and restore us for a purpose. ***And I said, “Here am I, send me!” He said, “Go and tell...”***

I've got to say to Isaiah, “Be careful”. Because I've said what Isaiah said – “Here I am, Lord. I will do what you want me to do.” Be careful now. It's like those times when Amanda will ask, “Steve, would you do something for me?” And I hesitate. I know I made a commitment nearly 30 years ago “for better, for worse” – a commitment to love unconditionally and to serve unconditionally. But there are some things I don't like to do. It's not a matter of my ability to do them. I just don't want to. So I hesitate. And I hear her say, “Steve, are you listening to me?” My hesitation does not mean I am not listening but there is this inner battle going on. You would think in 30 years I would know better than to hesitate. I've even read the research into what makes for healthy marriages and the right response is clear. The response must always be: “yes dear.” But still I hesitate. I don't get it right. Our daughter Bethany was home for the past week and on Monday Amanda asked if I would like to spend the day with my daughter. Of course, I would. Bethany is a costume designer and she wanted to go to the Mall of America to see the display of dresses worn by Princess Diana. It's not the sort of thing I would choose to do, but this wasn't to be about me. It was about spending time with my daughter. So, Amanda, Bethany and I went to the mall and we got in line. I thought we would see the dresses and move on – 10-15 minutes tops – but the sign on the

entrance said it would cost \$21.50 for each person to enter. That's no 10-15 minutes. Did I really want to spend \$21.50 to see the dresses? Let's be honest, would you? I made it all the way to the front of the line and I said, "I just can't do it." And I walked away. Amanda and Bethany spent the next two hours looking at dresses while I walked away. At first, I felt good about walking away from spending \$21.50 – from looking at dresses. Only later did I realize what I had walked away from was a commitment to spend the day with my daughter who comes home just once or twice a year. "Be careful now..." If only this had been the first time in my life that I had ever walked away. Isaiah, Steve, be careful now.

There is a cost for experiencing God. When God places a claim on our lives – it is for a purpose. Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? I will, says Isaiah. Here I am send me. But there's a cost: ***"Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' 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."*** Isaiah's message will not win him any friends. It won't even bring people closer to God. God knows that the message will actually harden people's hearts. They have walked so far away. Sin does that. Sin leads us down a path to greater insensitivity to it and deeper entanglement in it and often we must hit bottom before we will be receptive to change. Isaiah will speak but the people will not understand – not until they hit bottom. And Isaiah who a moment ago said, Here I am send me. Now responds – How long? And the answer that we will see in the weeks to come is until everything is destroyed and in their distress, the people will cry out for a Savior.

Why do we exist? It is easy for the church to forget why we exist and what our mission is. Jesus told us right after the resurrection: "As the Father has sent me, now I am sending you." Go and tell... Amid all the voices in this world that call out to us and all the burdens that distract us, there is a place deep within each of us desperately waiting to be told – "your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for". For God's sake we go into a world full of despair, emptiness, grief, fear and pain. We take our lives that experience the Holy One of Israel in this space and make them speak for God.

Prayer

Grant, O God, as we come into your presence, a sense of your transcendent holiness. Enable us not only to hear your call, but to respond to it; not only to listen, but to understand. Give us this day ears to hear, eyes to see, and a mind to understand, so that we may, thus equipped, live in service to you until we see the whole earth full of your glory. Amen.

Study Guide

Introduction to this week's GPS readings: This week, we see three major themes: Isaiah's call from God to be a prophet; the coming disaster that awaits Judah and Israel at the hands of Assyria and Babylon; and "a remnant", always giving hope that no

matter how deeply God's people have been hurt by their sins and the sins of others, God will still make a way to redeem them. This redemption is understood later by the New Testament writers as not only for the people of Isaiah's day, but also the coming Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, who offers all people redemption through the giving of his own life.

Monday Read Isaiah 6

What gives Isaiah the right to pronounce judgment on the leaders of Judah and the worshippers in the Temple? The answer is found in the chapter. Isaiah received a call from God. Before he announced any judgment on others, he first confessed his own sin and said, "Woe is me." He saw the Holy One of Israel, and he could not keep silent.

- How would you feel if you suddenly found yourself in the court of the One, Perfect, Holy God? When God asks "whom shall I send", why would Isaiah be reluctant?
- The "live coal" gives Isaiah confidence to speak. What would it take to get you to deliver God's message to others, even if it feels uncomfortable to do so?

Tuesday Read Isaiah 7-8

Isaiah deals with the political situation and the failure of the leaders to trust God. It was a fearful time for Judah and Israel. War was imminent from within and from outside forces. First, Isaiah offers a sign of hope – Immanuel. Then he issues a warning, using three contrasts to show the rulers of Judah the mistake they were making by trusting Assyria instead of trusting the Lord.

- What are the things that cause fear in your day to day life? Are some of these things (like the two kingdoms), things of your own doing that need to be addressed and changed?
- When confronted by the threat of War, god had one answer for the people: "the Lord himself will give you a sign". That sign was a child that would be "God with us". How can you allow God to be more a part of your daily life and calm your fears?

Wednesday Read Isaiah 9-10

Isaiah's prophecies bounce between harsh judgments from God to uplifting promises of mercy and grace. Both are seen in these two chapters. Chapter 9 gives us a look ahead to the coming Messiah, speaking of light shining in the land of darkness and a child being born who would be the way to peace. Isaiah is not only speaking of the time in which he lived but also the One who would come 700 years later.

- Where are the areas of darkness you need God's light to shine to show you the way? Which of the terms used for the coming child speaks to you the most?

- Chapter 10 turns to God’s call for justice for the poor and oppressed. What do these words inspire you to do in order to be a person who practices promoting justice in this world?

Thursday Read Isaiah 11-12

In contrast to the proud trees that God cuts down is a tender shoot from a seemingly dead stump. Isaiah looked beyond his people’s trials to the glorious kingdom that will be established when the Messiah comes to reign. The song of chapter 12 concludes this section of Isaiah in which the prophet has used four significant names to tell the people what God had planned for them. Because of Immanuel, there is a message of hope. Maher-shalal-hash-baz gives a warning of judgment, but his brother, Shear-jashub, speaks of a promise of mercy. The father’s name, Isaiah, brings a song of joy.

- According to Matthew 1:1, who is the “shoot from the stump of Jesse (David’s father)”? What will be his attributes? Which of these do you feel you need the most in your daily life?
- Chapter 12 a great song of praise. What song of praise would you sing to God today? You may want to write it out and give it as a gift to God.

Friday Read Isaiah 13-14

Again, we see God’s judgment against those who oppose him, and his desire to find redemption for those very people. Jerusalem and Babylon are contrasting cities: One is the chosen city of God, the other the wicked city of humanity. The city of God will last forever, but the rebellious city of humanity will ultimately be destroyed. In the fall of Babylon, Isaiah saw a picture of “the day of the LORD” when God’s judgment would extend to the whole world.

- In this season of Lent, it is appropriate for us to ask: where is my life opposed to God’s plan? How can I be more like Christ?
- Knowing I am powerless against God, and often powerless to even control my own life and destiny, how can I have any hope of being all God created me to be? Spend some time in prayer asking God to change the things you are unable to change in your life.

Saturday Read Isaiah 19-20

Today we are skipping over two of the proclamations made against nations for not following God’s will. God is not only the God of Israel but also the God of all the nations of the world. All are accountable to God. In chapter 19, we read the prophecy against Egypt. Then, in chapter 20, a surprising request from God: Isaiah is told to walk naked for three years as a message from God!

- For these three years, Isaiah no longer preached the message. Isaiah became the message. It was as if God had grown frustrated with words which the people essentially ignored. Maybe now the people would pay attention. Has there been a time when God might have grown frustrated with you – for your unwillingness to change?
- Saint Francis once said: “Preach at all times, and when needed, use your words.” How do you embody God’s message of justice and love to the world? How is our church embodying God’s message?