

“A Last Word”
Isaiah 6:1-8
June 30, 2024

INTRODUCTION:

There was a first sermon almost 31 years ago, and it was inevitable that one day there would be a last sermon. That day has now arrived, and just over twelve hours from now I will no longer officially be your pastor, even though you will always be in my heart.

I've chosen for this final sermon a passage that has some similarities to our situation as a church. Isaiah is given a vision of God, and the passage begins with a time stamp, “In the year that King Uzziah died.” Uzziah was king of Judah for 52 years, and it is recorded in both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles that he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. The Chronicles account gives more detail, and it reports that much of his efforts were devoted to strengthening Judah's military. Since that was seen as the main job of a king, and since Uzziah had done so well in this area, his death would certainly have caused some anxiety in the hearts of many in Judah. Would his son, who would succeed him to the throne, continue to bring good to the nation? Or would he repeat the pattern seen so often in Judah's brothers to the north, Israel?

What the nation needed in this time of uncertainty, and what we all need in the inevitable uncertainties of our lives, is a vision of God's holiness and grace. That's what Isaiah is given here, and now we too can see what he saw. This passage also gives me the opportunity to review some of the most central themes God has seen fit to put on my heart as foundational to my ministry among you for these past decades.

I. Seeing the True God

In the vision Isaiah was given, he saw the Lord sitting upon a throne in the temple. Kings sit on thrones. In the imagery of the Bible, God is especially present in the temple. It is something of a beachhead of God's reconquest of the entire earth. The train of God's robe filled the entire temple, communicating the truth that God's presence fills the world he rules.

Isaiah sees angelic creatures called “the seraphim.” They are standing above the Lord, not because they have any authority over him but because they are his attendants waiting upon him. “Seraphim” is the plural form of “seraph,” meaning that there were multiple of these creatures. The word means “burning one,” so these creatures would have the appearance of a blaze of light. The seraphim are important pieces of the vision because Isaiah sees much of the

character of God through the actions and words of these creatures. You can tell a great deal about someone by seeing the reactions of others who are close to them, and that is true in this case. We're told that these creatures have three pairs of wings, with one pair used to cover their eyes, a second pair their feet, and a third pair to fly. All three pairs, it seems to me, make the same point, and that point is that their single focus is on serving the One on the throne. Their eyes and feet are covered as an indication that they don't seek their own paths in life. One thing that is not covered is their ears because they have tuned their ears to hear the commands of their Lord. Once those commands are spoken, they use their wings to fly quickly to obey.

The seraphim are speaking to one another, probably in antiphonal form much like we do in our responsive readings in worship. Those who have the privilege of such nearness to God, with all the clarity that comes from such proximity, use words to worship him. Whenever there is a dominant reality in your life, you can't help but speak of it. When that young couple has their first baby, they want friends and family to know about it. The seraphim are compelled to speak, saying, **"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"** They speak of the holiness and glory of God.

The holiness of God means at least two things. The root of the word "holy" is that of separation. Though there is a sense of God's presence in his creation, he is separate from it in the fact that he alone is uncreated because he is the Creator. One of the most fundamental truths about God is the simple yet profound truth that God is God and you are not. If you are here today exploring a possible relationship with God, you would do well to start with this truth of the God-ness of God. Holiness also means that God is completely separate from what is sinful.

The seraphim are so struck by the holiness of God that they say it three times. O. T. scholar Alec Motyer explains this three-fold repetition of the word 'holy.' "Hebrew uses repetition to express either a superlative, as when 'pure gold' in 2 Kings 25:15 translates 'gold gold', or a totality, as when 'full of tar pits' in Genesis 14:10 translates 'pits pits'. But here for the only time in the Hebrew Bible a quality is raised to the power of three." The effect of these words was dramatic. **"And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called."** If you want to shake up this world in a good way, worship of the true God is the most effective way to do it.

By way of application, let's return once more to the timing of this vision "in the year that King Uzziah died." I've already mentioned his long reign of 52 years and his ability to strengthen Judah's military power in a way that allowed for the extension of Judah's borders as he defeated their traditional enemies. What I have not mentioned yet is something reported of him in 2 Chronicles. Toward the end of his life, his success caused his fall into pride

when he attempted to enter the temple to offer incense there. This was a clear violation of God's law since only priests were allowed to do this. For his pride, God struck him with leprosy, and he lived the rest of his years in the isolation forced upon lepers. The application is to recognize that it is in times of change and uncertainty that our eyes are often opened to see God in new and fresh ways. My encouragement to my AVPC family is to let any uncertainty, fear and anxiety you may be feeling take you to a place of beholding with fresh eyes the goodness and might of God as he cares for you.

II. Seeing the True Self

Isaiah's vision of God not only changed his view of God, but of himself as well. It was not a pleasurable experience. He now saw things about himself that had been true all along, but which he had not seen prior to seeing God. He said, **"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the lord of hosts!"** The word "woe" is a word for being cursed. He is saying, "Surely I have brought a curse upon myself." Older translations read next, "I am undone" instead of "lost." The literal meaning of the word is to be silent. It is used of the silence brought about by such significant loss that there is nothing to be said. It is the kind of loss experienced by Job when his three friends came and for a few days just sat with him in silence. This is the way Isaiah felt after seeing God and then having insight into his true self.

What was it that Isaiah saw of himself and his uncleanness that warranted such a strong reaction? It was his lips, his speech. We may be tempted to say, "Wait a minute Isaiah. Don't be so hard on yourself. Everyone slips up from time to time in what comes out of their mouth." Notice, though, that Isaiah refused to draw any comfort from the commonness of unclean lips. In his view it was even more bad news that he lived among a people of unclean lips. Isaiah saw the truth that Jesus would teach centuries later, the truth that the lips reveal what is on the heart. **"What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person"** (Matt. 15:18). So that word of anger that escapes unchecked, even if only a mild frustration, reveals a heart that doesn't submit to God's control. The unguarded word of gossip, slander, dishonesty, or boasting is a window to an unholy heart.

Upon seeing the sinfulness of his own heart, Isaiah was silent. One of the marks of the true conviction of sin that God brings is few words as opposed to many words. How do you respond when you are confronted with your sin? Our instinctive response is defensiveness, which always involves many words. This is the response of unbelief. Do you remember Jesus' parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee? While the Pharisee was full of words about himself and his worth, the tax collector spoke only a simple prayer of desperation. **"God, be**

merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13). It was the man of few words, Jesus said, who left forgiven. Multiplied words of defensiveness are a form of self-trust, while simple words of humble confession are words of faith.

III. Seeing the True Gospel

The response to Isaiah’s humble confession is recorded next. **“Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.’”** Remember that seraphs are attendants serving the Lord. A seraph would do nothing on his own, but would immediately obey a command from the Lord on the throne. The action of these verses, then, are at God’s command.

What is the action commanded? The seraph flies to the altar, takes a coal from it with tongs, carries in his hand the coal so acquired and touches the lips of Isaiah with the coal. To understand the significance of this, we must remember that the altar in the temple was the place of sacrifice. It was where an animal’s life was sacrificed in place of a guilty sinner. This speaks in the same manner as the rest of the Bible of the satisfaction of God’s justice through substitutionary sacrifice.

I came to faith in Christ as an 18-year old college freshman when I saw the truth of substitutionary atonement, though I saw it from a different passage. It can be seen throughout the Bible, because it is the throughline of the Bible from beginning to end. So it is fitting that my final sermon here should go back to the place where it all began for me. Substitutionary atonement highlights both the judgment and mercy of God. It is seen in our passage here. Isaiah wasn’t just being pessimistic when he acknowledged the curse his sin had brought upon him. He was being truthful. And because God is a just God, he can do nothing other than bring judgment against that which is sinful. This passage declares, though, that this judgment is visited upon someone other than Isaiah. An animal—perhaps it was a lamb—had its throat slit, bled out, and then was burned upon the altar. But the blood of an animal cannot really pay the penalty for the sin of a man or woman. All the sacrifices of the Old Testament only looked forward to the sacrifice of the lamb of God who would pay this penalty in full.

As a result of substitutionary atonement, salvation is anchored in both the justice and mercy of God. God’s judgment and justice has now been transformed to good news for us. If the penalty for sin has been paid by the death of a substitute, then it would be unjust for God to require a second payment. God will never be unjust. And we see also the grace of God in the fact

that the substitutionary sacrifice was none other than God himself in the person of the second member of the trinity. That's how far God was willing to go to bring redemption and restoration to his fallen children.

For the first time in verse 8, we hear the voice of God. Isaiah, with his guilt removed and his sin atoned for, draws near enough to hear the deliberations of the divine council as they ask, **“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”** In Isaiah's response, we see the power of the gospel to transform a life. **“Here am I! Send me.”** But wait a minute, Isaiah. Don't you want to know the assignment before you volunteer for it? Another theme of my ministry has been that it is the grace of God that transforms our lives. Isaiah's life has been transformed. For him, it doesn't matter what the assignment is because his life is now properly ordered. God is God, and Isaiah is his beloved servant.

The truth is that Isaiah was in fact called to undertake an extraordinarily difficult assignment. For fifty years, he was called to preach a message that would not be received by his hearers. Imagine being a salesman who never closes a deal for fifty years, or a doctor who never heals a patient, not because the salesman or doctor lack skills but because of the stubborn response of others. That was Isaiah's call.

CONCLUSION:

I'm not sure what God has for AVPC's future, and I know that none of you know either. But I believe God's word for you now is to receive his grace through Jesus Christ and to say with Isaiah, “Here am I, send me.”