



Isaiah 6
The Story
The Beginning of the Endⁱ

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This morning we continue the series we've been in since September, going through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, focusing on the big picture narrative of what God is doing, in a series called, "The Story." If you would like more detail than we're getting on Sundays, I would encourage you to read the book that goes by the same name, "The Story." It's 31 chapters long, and we're half way through it – today's sermon correlates to chapter 16. You can read each chapter in 30 minutes or so. It is the Bible laid out in a chronological way – which helps to understand things, because the Bible itself is not laid out chronologically – and it also stays focused on the main narrative of Scripture, about God's initiative and faithfulness in loving his Creation, especially humanity, created in His image...and more narrowly focused on his initiative and faithfulness with His people, the Israelites.

But the Israelites were not perfect in their relationship with God. Their faithfulness back to Him is fickle. And we start to see the fruit of that as the nation of Israel is divided into two kingdoms, and as the leaders of those kingdoms participate in religious practices and worship that are not honoring of Yahweh who is the God of the Bible and Lord of the Israelites. **And the fruit of their waywardness from God is discord, division, and eventually: disintegration.**

So last week we looked at Elijah, who lived in the 800's B.C., and his message to the people to stop following Baal, the god of the Canaanites, and to follow and worship Yahweh. It's an uphill battle for him and the other prophets who had a similar message, and in spite of their proclamations and words of caution and extolling the people and the kings and the other leaders to get back on track with the Lord...in spite of all that, both the Northern Kingdom and the Southern one, eventually fall to other nations.

Israel, to the north, was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and Judah, in the south, was taken by the Babylonians 125 years later. These are the periods of exile that we read about in some of the prophetic writings of Scriptures as well, where there is a message of hope being given in the midst

of the exile.

But before that timeframe, before the message of hope as they were in exile and under foreign rule, there came a message of warning and caution, urging the people to return to the Lord's ways, or else there would be this disintegration of the two Kingdoms. We saw some of it last week, and we see more of that today with this passage from Isaiah.

Isaiah lived in Judah, the southern kingdom, the one that was captured later...he was a prophet from about the 740's B.C., to about 685 B.C. and prophesied during the reigns of several different kings – we see their names crop up throughout the book of Isaiah, including in Isaiah 1:1, **“The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (Isaiah 1:1).** This particular passage is one of the more famous ones, in part because of the imagery, in part because of the hymn Holy, Holy, *Holy* and other worship songs that gain their lyrical inspiration from it, and because it is quoted in the New Testament several times.

So the passage begins with this great vision that Isaiah has. Everyone loves this part of Isaiah 6. **Clearly, it's the narrative of Isaiah's call to ministry, or more specifically, it's the call to a particular facet of his ministry.** In other prophetic books in the Bible where the call to ministry is given – such as in Jeremiah and Ezekiel – the event of being called to ministry is given right at the start. To have it here, a little ways in, is unusual. So maybe it's not about his initial call to ministry, but a calling to a new season of ministry, a new message that the Lord is leading him to deliver to the people, that began in the year that King Uzziah died.

And this call to ministry comes in a vision with this depiction of seraphim flying and calling to one another. This begs the question: what are seraphim? Well, in Hebrew, the ending “im” is how a noun becomes plural. So “seraphim” simply means that there is more than one seraph in this vision. So there you go...isn't that helpful? ☺

Of course, that still leaves us wondering about seraphs. And other than a

description of them such as we have here, we really don't know. Artists have sought to give us an idea of **what they might look** like based on what we're told in Scripture. Here's one:

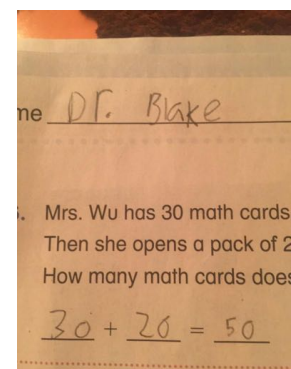


They're some kind of heavenly being...Really, they sound pretty close to what we picture as angels, but with multiple sets of wings. Isaiah sees them in this vision, with their faces and feet covered by two sets of wings each, and the third set keeping them flying in the air. He hears them calling out to one another these words that have inspired a number of hymns and worship songs over the years:

**“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3).**

In case there was any doubt: God is holy. It's repeated for us here three times, that Yahweh (Lord) is holy, and the whole earth is full of his glory. This is yet another instance, such as we saw in the creation account of Genesis 1, and the detailed, slowed-down account of Genesis 2 and 3, that all creation – or at least the earth, as it says here – is full of God's glory. This third rock from the sun on which we live, points us to a creator God. It is full of his glory. There is something about Creation – it's beauty, it's majesty, the creativity that exists in it – this all reflects the glory of God. It reveals to us, and is full of, the glory of the Lord.

This last week, a class assignment came home from the teacher that our 2nd grader had done. As most of you know, his name is Elliott. What some of you know, and some of you may not, is that Elliott has a really good sense of humor and is quite imaginative and creative. He also really looks up to his big brother, Blakely, even if he doesn't always act like he looks up to him. But he does – he likes to do many of the same things that Blake does – wrestling, soccer, drums, and more. And all of this came crashing together in this schoolwork assignment, because at the top of the assignment, where he was supposed to put his name, he put something different. I **have a photo** of it here for you to see. He put his name as: “Dr. Blake.” It cracked



us up! We asked the teacher if she knew what was behind this – because we were kind of curious – and she said that Elliott had lately been putting Blake’s name down on his assignments, and with this one had amended it to read, “Dr. Blake.” So, there you go! I’m just glad he got the math right on the assignment, or else I probably would have not felt comfortable putting this up on the screen for all of you to see!

So, in this small piece of paper and with just a few letters, it reveals to us his adoration of his brother and his sense of humor. Similarly, the earth is full of, and reveals the glory of God.

As is usually or even always the case in the Old Testament, seeing a messenger of God is considered to actually be seeing God himself. And so we see in verse 5, Isaiah’s response to all of this, **“Woe is me! I am ruined! 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” (Isaiah 6:5).** This description of himself and the people stands in stark contrast to the repeated holiness of God. To look upon a messenger of God, was to see God. Jesus said, “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father.” And in Old Testament times, to see God was thought to bring certain ruin because of the disparity in holiness between God and people...God is holy, holy, ,holy, and we are not. And so, to even look upon God, or a messenger of His, was considered completely inappropriate and had dire consequences.

But the vision continues, and one of the seraphim flies over to him with a hot coal in his hand and touches Isaiah’s lips with it and says, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” **And once again, as we see throughout Scripture, God takes the initiative.** It’s not because of our doing, it’s not that we’ve earned it or are worthy of it. He simply does it on His own volition. And even though it’s a vision...this is not the same as Jesus who really lived and really died on the cross...even though this is a vision, the implications are real. God is taking the initiative to cleanse him and make him fit for the purposes that God has in mind for him.

This question from God then comes to him in the vision: “Whom shall I send?” And he gives the answer that we all would do well to answer: **“Here I**

am! Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8). This is the answer that inspires.

“Here I am! Send me!” This is the answer that fills us with hope.

“Here I am! Send me!” This is the answer that pleases God.

“Here I am! Send me!” This is the answer that is filled with faith.

“Here I am! Send me!” This is the answer that is open to God’s leading.

“Here I am! Send me!” This is the answer that is filled with humility.

“Here I am! Send me!” This is the answer that a servant has.

“Here I am! Send me!” This is the answer that Jesus gave as he cleansed us, not just by touching our lips with coal in a vision, but dying on the cross so that we too would have our guilt taken away and our sin atoned for. “Here I am, Father, send me. I will take their sin upon my back...I will take it to the cross...and I will cleanse them and take away their guilt and atone for their sins.” This is the answer Jesus gave.

And “Here I am! Send me!” is the answer that Isaiah gave, and that we can give as well. And then he hears in this vision what God is sending him to do. With these newly cleaned lips, he is sending him to proclaim a message. A message of hope? A message of prosperity? A message of joy?

There was once a young man who, in his youth, professed a desire to become a “great” writer. When asked to define “great” he said “I want to write stuff that the whole world will read, stuff that people will react to on a truly emotional level, stuff that will make them scream, cry, wail, howl in pain, desperation, and anger!” He now works for Microsoft writing error messages.ⁱⁱ

And that story pretty well sums up what the message was that Isaiah was to proclaim at this time. **He’s called to deliver an “error message,” and it’s going to require a system reboot.** It’s not a message of hope, prosperity, joy, or anything else along those lines. Like the error message that pops up on your screen, this was a message that people didn’t want to hear, and Isaiah didn’t want to give. But as we’ve seen the last couple Sundays in this series, the people on the whole were already not walking with the Lord, and hadn’t for some time. They were already in this place as a nation. The Kings who led them were worshipping idols, and that filtered down to many, and probably most, of the people as well.

So, the message he's to proclaim is, **"Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving"** (Isaiah 6:9). And further, Isaiah is to make their hearts calloused and their ears dull, and their eyes closed, so that they would not turn and be healed. This is not what we expect, but prophetic words are often not what we expect. Isaiah himself is shocked by the message, and asks, "How long?" It's not just a question of duration of time, but is kind of a shorthand way of saying, "Gee, that doesn't seem right. That seems unfair. Judah deserves better than that."

So, this is the fate of the nation. **It doesn't mean that on an individual basis God has abandoned them.** Isaiah himself is a part of the nation and he's just had this vision of God's messenger wiping away his guilt and atoning for his sin. So this isn't an eternal condemnation for all the souls of Judah. But this is kind of like chemotherapy for Judah. The chemo is needed to kill the cancer cells, but as you know, chemotherapy kills a lot of other cells, too – skin, hair, bone, and more. But by going through it, even though it's painful and very difficult, the person is healthier in the end, as the cancer is eradicated.

I think that's analogous to what's going on here. It's not too unlike when the Israelites had tried to enter the promised land 1300 years earlier or so, and didn't. And God said, "Fine. You can wander in the desert for 40 years until the current generation of weak leaders has died off, and a new generation is raised up. This is also similar to the situation that Paul addressed in his letter to the Romans, where he writes about some people who claimed to know God, but were living completely contrary to that, and he writes, **"Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts...Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done."** (Romans 1:21, 24). As a group, God is letting them go their own way. That doesn't mean that individually he doesn't reach out to them, can't forgive them, and doesn't love them.

But the nation will be reduced to next to nothing. It's a severe pruning, something Jesus said his father does: He prunes, so that in the long run there would be more fruit. So the discord and the division that they've experienced

so far will lead to disintegration. Almost nothing will be left – a seed, or a stump is it. That’s how far down the pruning will go. The fact that something is left does give a glimmer of hope. There’s going to be a little bit left for God to work with to rebuild the nation, but that’s a ways down the road.

This is the beginning of the end of Israel and then Judah. I suppose, really, the beginning of the end was even earlier than this, when they began worshipping false gods. But after all God’s Messengers, His prophets, tried to call the people back to God’s ways, and they didn’t repent and go in a new direction, this is the result.

And this hard message is the message Isaiah is called to give, as he answers, “Here I am! Send me!” I can imagine after Isaiah heard the message he was to deliver in this vision, he wanted to speak up and say, “Hey, I didn’t say ‘send me;’ I said ‘send he...’ Send that guy over there!” But he stuck to it. And when we answer like that, God may use us in something that’s tough.

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to follow me must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:16). Following Jesus and going where he sends us is not guaranteed to be easy. In fact, the guarantee seems to be just the opposite, as there is a dying to our selves that takes place – a dying to sin such as selfishness, pride, greed, and so much more. That stuff gets burned away by hot coals...it gets pruned. Sometimes it needs spiritual chemotherapy. And that’s painful. It’s a hard message to hear that we need pruning in our lives. But we can be grateful that the most painful part of it, Jesus has taken care of when he went to the cross: Like the nation of Judah getting disintegrated to almost nothing, Jesus was reduced to almost nothing on the cross. It looked like the beginning of the end, just as Isaiah and Israel experienced, as well. What looks like a terrible end, is exactly what we need in order to begin anew with God and be filled with His presence so that His glory would be made known through us. Because, truly: Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty, the earth – including us once He has cleansed us – is full of his glory. Let’s pray...Amen.

ⁱ Today’s sermon correlates to Chapter 16 in “The Story.” We took orders for copies of the book, “The Story” at church, but now you can get a copy of the book on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for “NIV The Story Bible” at their website.

ⁱⁱ <http://jokes.cc.com/funny-technology/upouvl/writing-s-powerful-message>