

Here I Am, Send Me
Isaiah 6:1-8
May 30, 2021
First Presbyterian, Luling

This passage is Isaiah's call story. If you were to ask Isaiah, Isaiah, what experience was it that led you to be a prophet for God? Isaiah's answer would be something along the lines of, well, I was terrified out of my mind! And that's when I decided to follow God and be a prophet. So we might conclude that Isaiah was in some terrifying situation and God saved him, and then he decided to follow the God who had saved him. But, no. God was the situation that terrified Isaiah. And yet Isaiah traces his calling to that moment of terror.

It was a tumultuous time. In the year that King Uzziah died, the story begins. I imagine in ten years or so, we might begin to say, "It was 2020, you know," and we'll all remember the turmoil and turbulence and uncertainty that we collectively went through in 2020 and obviously continues into 2021, for many of us. It will be a shorthand for pandemic and political upheaval and economic hardship. The year that King Uzziah died, a year when a good and steady ruler died, was a year kind of like 2020 or 2021 have been. A year when things went bad, a marker the people remembered as a turning point.

So things were already difficult. And Isaiah then has this terrifying experience on top of the same turmoil that everyone else was undergoing. He is in the Temple and sees God, something the Law had said was not possible. If someone saw God, they would surely die immediately. God, as Isaiah sees, is so immense that just the hem of God's robe fills the entire Temple. The Temple was designed and understood to be representative of the whole world, so in a way Isaiah is saying that just the hem of God's robe filled the whole world. God was bigger than Isaiah had even imagined, and I think while we understand that God is beyond our understanding, this is a visual way of depicting that. We can see, or perceive, or understand, just a smidgen of God at a time.

That might be scary enough to contemplate. But there was more that was terrifying. The seraphs, who were fiery snakes with three sets of wings. Those seem weird and scary to us, and they were just as weird and scary to Isaiah. The familiar words "Holy, holy, holy" that the seraphs sing are so loud that they shake the doors on their hinges. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory." We've become so accustomed to those words that they've lost

their intensity. It's a song of worship, but equally a song of awe and the utter magnitude of God.

Whatever we might think of seraphs and holy holy holy, we can learn a lot by watching Isaiah. He sees these beings. And he smells the smoke that flows through the Temple. And he hears their song. And he's not joyfully worshipping or in awestruck wonder. He's scared. Terrified.

I was trying to think of a more relatable situation that might cause us to be terrified in this way. And I'm having a hard time coming up with something. My in-house sermon consultants, both rising sixth graders, suggested a variety of things. It would be terrifying, they said, to see a child drowning. Well, yes, it would. It would be terrifying to speak in front of people. Well, to some people it is. On Friday night, just a half mile down the road from us, a tree fell on a car, as the car was driving by on the highway. Thankfully the occupants of the car were not injured, but I can only imagine that was completely terrifying. I'm not sure I've really come up with a good comparison of something so overwhelmingly terrifying as Isaiah's vision of God in the Temple.

We know Isaiah was terrified because his first response is to confess, loudly and clearly, his own unworthiness in the face of God's holiness. I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips, he quickly confesses. In the overwhelming presence of God, we can't pretend. All we can do is be ourselves, telling the whole truth about who we are.

After Isaiah's confession of sin, one of the seraphs burns his lips with a hot coal, as if to purify them from the uncleanness that Isaiah has confessed. Again, terrifying. Traumatic. This whole episode has to have shaken Isaiah physically, mentally, spiritually. And again, I have a hard time thinking of something in our lives that would be equivalent. What could be this terrifying at every level of our being? And whatever that might be, how would we respond?

What happens next is unexpected. This is all happening in a time of stress and uncertainty. Isaiah has had this terrifying experience on top of all that stress and uncertainty. Having seen the hem of God's robe and experienced this encounter with the seraphs, Isaiah then hears God's voice. And God's voice says "Whom shall I send and who shall go for us?" Send where? Go to do what? There are zero details.

In the year that King Uzziah died. Immediately after the most terrifying experience of his whole life, Isaiah hears this question, and raises his hand. Here I am. Send me.

In the year 2020 and 2021. In the midst of the anxiety and stress and constant shifts and changes; after some terrifying experiences, though they may not compare to Isaiah's terrifying experience; I confess that I'm not sure I am jumping up and down and waving my hand and volunteering for whatever God might have in mind, sight unseen, details untold. I am the one looking around for someone else to raise their hand, someone else to speak up. Maybe you are too.

But Isaiah's faithfulness is clear. He doesn't wait to hear the assignment. He doesn't plead exhaustion or "I've had it up to here with new challenges." His trust in God is absolute. Here I am. Send me.

May we have Isaiah's courage. May we have his faithfulness. May we respond "Here I am. Send me" and trust in the God whose transcendence we can only begin to grasp. And trust in the God who knows us and calls us.