

Isaiah 6: 1-8 USE THIS FIRST PART AS A CALL TO WORSHIP

I invite you now to a time of stillness.
An open, wide-eyed, expectant stillness.

The stillness of a child listening from the top step on Christmas Eve. Listening for sleigh bells and reindeer hooves

That kind of silence.
Something wonderful is about to happen.
Let the silence hold your breath for you
Let it be what it needs to be right now.
Let it open your senses to the rustling of wings
The haziness of the smoke that smells of deep down things

While your heart, warm and darkly moist,
Beating with hope
Thumps out the two syllable chorus of the living

We are in the presence of something wondrous
AND
The presence of something wondrous is in us

We are sniffing at the edges of a Mystery
Glimpsing glory, reaching out to touch the hem of a garment whose fabric is eternal and fills everything we know
And what is that rustling? The sound of the skirts of a story enrobed in wonder
Or is it angels' wings?

There are angels all around. Earthly and unearthly
And this is what they are singing

HOLY HOLY HOLY

It seems pretentious, in a way, to preach this. It's beautiful, it is haunting and more than a bit confusing - and it's the kind of scripture that gets stuck in your guts. It's not my job to explain it....that would be to underestimate the beauty of the passage itself, to overestimate both my task and my ability, and it would be to sadly and arrogantly misunderstand the nature of the scriptures generally.

My job is to hold this up like a jewel....
Let the light shine through it...hold it this way and that and see how differently the light comes through when we see it from different angles...
And to treasure the jewel itself

I'll do my best.

We're going to end this service by singing Here I Am, Lord...which is where this sermon is heading, so I don't want to let go of that goal. It begins with angels singing HHH and ...At the end, Isaiah hears the voice of God saying who will go for us....

To which he responds
Here am I, send me.

Two things before we get there though.

First, just to note for your wondering: why do you think God says “who will go for US?” Interesting, eh? Who will go for US? Hmmmm.

The other is to understand at least a bit of why and when this was written.

“In the year that King Uzziah died”.

That's like saying....

Well...

Do you have a time in your life that was like a watershed? You can remember things relative to that? So for me, for example, it might be...in the year that my husband died....or that was the year that my friend had the accident or.....

You know what I mean? The year things fell apart.

So...the year that King Uzziah died was not just some random year. It was a year when things fell apart. , we're told, about 735 before the common era. 735 BCE.

Uzziah had been a good king, and during his reign the country had prospered, 40 years of relative peace and growth. He was a builder of water towers, the historians tell us, and that helped the crops, and so on. (it was also a time, as prosperity grew, that the profits of that went to some and not others....and the gap between rich and poor was more obvious and gaping and raw....but it's only afterward that we hear about that. Maybe because the historians were of the class of people who benefited) ...but in any case, Uzziah is seen at the time, by those in a position to tell us about it, he's seen as a good king. A stable influence. A bringer of peace and prosperity.

Then he got leprosy.....a terrible dreaded, death sentence of a disease. And he died. And that year...the people were afraid of what would come next....what they were in for, and it was as though the future all of a sudden was uncertain and not in a good way.

Know what I mean?

So.....at a time like that, when people uncertain and afraid....The year that things fell apart...

It's then that Isaiah has this vision. And hears a call.

That's important to know. What does it mean? I have no idea....but it happens the year things fell apart. That's good to know. That feels...right, to me. When things fall apart, when the centre does not hold, sometimes only something like this will do. Only a song . Only a vision, only a grief so deep that it takes a live coal from the throne of God to burn it away. And sometimes, only silence.

Isaiah's call to be a prophet comes from a place like this. In the face of everything falling apart....what's a person to do? He sees (well, partially anyway because the place is filled with smoke and it's only the hem of the heavenly garment....) but he sees a vision of a reality beyond and within his own reality....a sign of hope, a cleansing, and a call to proclaim it.

In the aftermath of this ...encounter....Isaiah begins to speak the warning and the hope that he's been given....and becomes one of the classic, major prophets of the Hebrew scriptures. If you read his words (at least the ones we have, the ones recorded and preserved...who knows what else, what other poetry,

what other wisdom came from him that is lost to us and may some day be discovered) but if you read his words in here, (chapters 1-39) you'll see that the vision and the commissioning were not warm and fuzzy. This cost him dearly. Speaking the hard truth to people who often did not want to hear it. For whom hearing it would require change, and change would cost privilege, and it's better to stone a prophet than give up privilege, everyone knows that.

Anyway, he begins to do what he agreed to when he said "hineni – here I am; send me"
Who he was before this, and how he saw things, I'm not sure
But what we know of Isaiah of Jerusalem as a prophet is that he is a keen observer of his world, he sees, as it were, through the eyes of God. He brings an analysis to his society – a second look, if you will, asking some piercing questions. About justice. Saying - Is life really as good as we thought when Uzziah was king/ ? What about the poorest of the poor? Just for example.
He calls them back to their history...

He takes the long look, and from his point of view
The joyful scramble out of slavery in Egypt all those years ago
Had become a march
And the march was becoming dangerously closer to a goosetep
And now someone new had to say
Let my people go.

He brings a stinging critique to a society that was deteriorating into an us and them mentality They've lost the vision he says. They have narrow tunnel vision

And Isaiah holds a stethoscope to the body of his people
And hears....a murmur there

He says – this is going to go on for some time, this madness...but listen – it won't last forever, and it doesn't have to be this way. We don't have to live like this. There are messengers all around us, trying to tell us that. It's like the earth and sky together are calling out for change
The very heavens themselves are crying out
It's like a song they're singing
And what are they singing? What are the words to their call?

H H H
The WHOLE EARTH is full of God's glory. (repeat)

Isn't that great? We hear it so often we don't really get the punch. That is as politically and religiously radical a statement as you're going to get. The whole earth IS full of God's glory. And all of us are in the process of discovering just how deeply true that is. The wonder of the universe that just keeps being revealed to us more and more as science grows and expands...as the body of knowledge of humanity deepens and widens...(I'm in the process of trying to learn astronomy right now. A basic textbook on the history of the study of the stars.....it's blowing my mind. And the stuff you hear from all areas of science and that's only the stuff that we know about...)

The whole earth is full of God's glory.
And we learn to speak with our lips and live with our lives and type on our keyboards
What our hearts already knew
And drum out with or without our will

Holy holy holy

Now: lest you think my middle name is Pollyanna, I need to say that along with that
When you learn and learn again the holiness of the creation and its creator
When you open yourself to that
You open yourself as well to pain.
And anyone who has ever lived at all
Has at one time been brought to their knees by the force of it.
And we ask why.

Why...that question comes up from within us, from a place too deep for words
In silence or in a tone...almost a howl.....
You know that place.
Yea you do.
Your body rocking out the rhythm of despair

Isn't it interesting how at the moment we feel most alone
Most abandoned
Most deeply wounded and desperate
Our bodies know
And we rock? Why, why, why

I once stood at the coffin of a man, alongside his four year old grandson
Who stood there, rocking
And he looked up finally and said
My words won't come out.

And that says it all. Sometimes, when we're faced with the enormity of it all, the unspeakably
magnificent, and the unspeakably horrible.... we are overcome and our words won't come out.

Isaiah , in the end, did speak. He spoke of the poverty of his own speech. Its inadequacy, its
brokenness.

Woe is me he says.....I'm a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips...my words
won't come out.

And yet....
There's a sound in every silence
And a burning that won't go away
And somehow, the self soothing rocking, the burning question why why why
Leaves a sound shadow in its wake
That seems to whisper:
What is that sound? A rustling? Angels' wings? A song?

And the why why why

Is so close to holy holy holy
That you can't tell the difference

Even when you don't want to hear it

Despair is not the final word
And apathy, hopelessness, cynicism
Is not your heart's true home.

The fire. His lips are touched by a burning coal. Fire.

Isn't it right, somehow, that we - all of us - express the deepest deep down things by returning to the elements: water, wind, earth, fire? AND by saying HOLY a lot? Usually we add something to the end of it though...but HOLY ____ comes out in spite of us at intense times.

In the silence, a burning
Isaiah says, a coal touching him, burning him out of his inertia

And with the charred remainder of what once was an innocence about life,
Now scorched beyond recognition, the prophet scoops up a handful of what is left, and with
Those ashes
On what seems like a door closed to possibility,
Takes those ashes and
Traces out a way forward.

The only thing more frightening than facing a world of uncertainty and pain believing that there is
nothing you can do about it
Is facing a world of pain knowing that there is.
There IS something you can do.

Can
And
Must.

This is your heart's true home. This is where life is to be found.
Hearing the voice calling
And in spite of everything you know to the contrary
Answering and saying heneyni - here I am
Send me.

Hineini
A sound mysteriously like angels wings
And your own heart beating, broken and brave
Beating out the song of the ages
Holy holy holy

And the two syllable chorus of all living things
Becomes a three syllable
Stammering but sturdy
Response
From holy to heineni

The Creator of Worlds, the Mystery of the sun and the stars says

Who will go for us? There is a hurting world to be mended
Who will go for us? There are words to be spoken and hands to be held and
Food to be shared
Who will go
And holy becomes heineni
And touched by the fire of it all you say

Hineyni – Here I am – send me