

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Isaiah 6:1-8

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Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 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. 3 And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "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."

6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"
And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

It's the season of barbeques and grilling out. Early in the evening, you begin to smell it in the air; it's a comforting, familiar, and enticing aroma. It's reminiscent of childhood, family gatherings, and good times. It's a tradition, a kind of ritual in many families—that the first meal cooked on the grill is the harbinger of summer. It tells us that the long, cold winter is over, the muddy spring is drawing to a close, and we're in for quite a treat with longer days, warmer temperatures, and lighter attitudes. And because there's so much more than just creating a heat source involved in this great American pastime, it is the opinion of those residing in the Long/Sanderson household that a charcoal grill is the way to go when it comes to cooking al fresco. Sure, gas is cleaner, more convenient, and quicker, but we're purists. We like to do it the old fashioned way, the way our parents cooked out until they all sold out to the gas grill conspiracy. Corey and I appreciate a well-crafted pyramid of charcoal briquettes, the acrid smell of the lighter fluid as it's sprayed on said pyramid, the excitement of the flames leaping towards the sky at the initial touch of the match, and finally the sweet satisfaction of smoldering embers—the perfect heat source for cooking steaks, burgers, hotdogs or whatever it is that will be gracing our pallets that evening. I like to watch the charcoal briquettes, initially as black as the night, as they transform from that black to blood orange and finally settle into an ashy gray tinged with hints of yellowish-orange from the smoldering embers inside. And though they may appear to have cooled off, those embers are hot with the potential to singe your eyebrows and torch your marshmallows should they get too close.

And with that image in mind, I want you to imagine taking a pair of tongs, picking up one of those glowing embers, and placing it against your lips—your tender, soft, and vulnerable lips that form a gateway to your mouth, your voice, your body. This is what happened to Isaiah, the prophet from of old, from whom so many of the great prophesies and images of the Bible come. It was Isaiah who said “and the lion shall lay down with the lamb”, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight”, “and from the stump of Jesse there shall sprout . . .” All of these prophesies came from our prophet with the scarred lips.

The coal placed upon his lips was a kind of anointing, a cleansing ritual meant to prepare him for the work God needed him to do. Isaiah had a tough road ahead of him. Let's travel back in time nearly 3000 years to learn more about the road he was to travel.

The year is 742 BCE. An educated young man from a good family stands thoughtfully in the Temple courtyard. He has come to Jerusalem's central shrine to worship God. The crowds mill past. The busy priests, preoccupied with their duties, are the only ones allowed inside the 200-year old Temple, into the Holy of Holies. It is a sad, difficult, and uncertain time for the people of Judah. The long and prosperous reign of King Uzziah is over, the beloved man has died. Without a leader, Judah's era of relative independence is in jeopardy. Judah, like sister-nation Israel, had become rich and luxurious under King Uzziah's reign. However, it was always an uneasy prosperity as enemy nations threatened their borders. Now, without their mighty king, it seems it's only a matter of time before the soldiers of the Assyrian Empire come stomping through their town; destroying their homes, murdering their people, and upturning their world.

Isaiah feels acutely this looming tension for he realizes that in addition to the threat from foreign armies, there lurks beneath the wealth and prosperity accumulated under the King's reign a dirty little domestic secret: the oppression of the poor. For too long, Isaiah has watched peasants driven from their farms to make way for fine manor houses. He watched pride, self-complacency, and a "Not In My Backyard" attitude quietly engulf the people. But with the death of their king and the threatening foreign armies, the folks in fine houses find themselves just as vulnerable as the beggar on the street. It might be easier for them to fool themselves for a while, but no one is truly secure. The nation stands at the crossroads. The people are forced to face the sins of their past, heal the wounds of their present, and determine a direction for their future.

It sounds a little too familiar, doesn't it? What was an ancient story to which I felt no connection when I read it as a seminarian now feels like an account of the past few years in our country. News this week of a leading terrorist's death reminds us all of September 11th, a day that changed our country and life as we knew it. That was the day on which we were shaken out of our complacency, apathy, and general sense of entitlement. These have been a turbulent few years, full of job loss, stock market dips, acts of violent aggression, troubling warfare, outrageous increases in fuel costs, and a general sense of disillusionment and fear.

And yet, in many places, church attendance is at all time highs. Last year this congregation turned out pledges over and above what was promised. Church attendance has been up and on a few Sundays we've even run out of bulletins. I can always count on attendance at Adult Education events. Some say it's our warm, friendly welcome that gets people here. Others think that it's our attractive and accessible building. Still others, these are the folks I really like, attribute the success of our ministry to whoever it is standing in this pulpit every Sunday. And while I suspect that all of these factors may contribute a little bit to our active church life, I suspect that the filling up of the pews in our little corner of the Holy of Holies is more about people's search for that something more that they can't find in their work, in their hobbies, or in their wealth. We're like Isaiah. We've come to our house of worship seeking the almighty God, hoping like the dickens that we might capture just a glimpse of the hem of the robe of the divine. We come to confess that we haven't done all we could to love our neighbor. We come to admit that we really have little control over our addictions, fears, and vices. We come to hear the

comforting and challenging words of the scriptures. We come because we, too, want hot lips. Lips that are hot to tell God's truth to a world aching to hear it. We want an encounter with the divine that inspires, motivates, and changes us. We come, just as Isaiah did, because we are the children of God, seeking to experience the Divine.

And let's return to 742 BC, to Isaiah's Temple experience, a religious experience the likes of which—minus the scorched lips—we so want to experience. The Jerusalem Temple is a strange, mysterious, even scary place. Although Isaiah has never peeked inside the holy inner sanctum, he's heard that angels guard the Ark of the Covenant. Veiled behind heavy, dark, purple curtains, the priests perform their brutal sacrificial duties. Row after row of candles flicker - barely visible through the stinging clouds of incense. The whole place reeks of animal sacrifice – a strange, nauseating mixture of smoke and blood. And it's while standing *here*, in the court of the *earthly* Temple, that Isaiah experiences his calling.

His is a vision, a revelation, of the *heavenly* Temple. There, God sits upon an enormous throne. So high is this throne, that only the underside hem of God's flowing robe is visible. Winged creatures soar above shouting eight-sided Halleluiahs back and forth. One calls to another, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory!' (vs. 3). Then, everything begins shaking, twisting, vibrating. As smoke begins to fill the place, Isaiah realizes he's in deep trouble. He cries out, 'I'm such a foul-mouthed person, and part of a foul-mouthed race! Now that I have glimpsed God's holy presence – I'm a goner for sure!'

But then, one of the winged things touches Isaiah's mouth with a piece of fire, a live coal, gently saying, 'there, there, it will be all right now.' A booming voice thunders, "Whom will I send?" All Isaiah says through his charred lips is, 'Me, I'll go.'

When we hear these ancient stories of divine vision and experiences, we often think of God's work in the past tense, that it's all contained within the pages of the Bible and ends with the last verse of Revelation. After all, who here has seen a burning bush like Moses or wrestled with an angel like Jacob or seen into the future like Joseph? We hear these Bible stories and they seem so removed and distant to us in our modern context. It might be tempting to dismiss God as irrelevant, to excuse ourselves from listening because God didn't send us an instant message or text message us. But God is not silent. I believe, as Gracie Allen wrote, that we should never place a period where God has put a comma for surely God Is Still Speaking. The message may be more obtuse and mysterious than we would desire, but the Divine speaks and it happens in places like this to people like us if we listen. Although our church and we may not always be as holy as we could be, this is a time and place where we can at least learn what the holy looks like. Where we begin to identify the features and characteristics of the divine, just as Isaiah did. This is where we hear about a lion laying down with a lamb, of a man who invited all into the family of God by eating with tax collectors, prostitutes, and thieves, of an empty tomb that marks the beginning of our eternal life of light and love with God.

God's voice still calls out in the midst of the crises and chaos of these days when planes drop out of the sky, neighborhoods are invaded by rebels and tanks, jobs are lost, children are homeless, a scary flu virus threatens to mutate, and we don't know where to turn. God's voice comes to us in the weeping of a battered wife, in the hungry cries of a starving child in the desert, in the protests

of sweatshop workers, in the demonstrations of environmentalists, and in the discoveries of scientists. There is still work to be done and God has called us to do it--has called us—you and me with all of our shortcomings and gifts--to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. The call is at once universal and individual. God calls us all to do the work of the dominion and gives us gifts and talents to answer that call in particular ways. Whatever it is that we're good at, our passion, that gift is from God and can be used to glorify God. We are being sent forth, just as Isaiah was. That's mission—being sent forth. Even though we may be willing to jump out of our pew and say, "Here I am, send me." Our next sentence might be "Uh, where are we going?" I can't answer that question for you. All I know is that you're called to join the ranks of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mary, and Martha, others who have dreamed the dreams and seen the visions. Over all these thousands of years God's love for us has endured. The healing love of God makes us new and whole and ready to serve. So let us go forth into the world whispering, or yelling, or singing, or praying with lips that are hot with the message of God's love, "Here I am Lord, Send Me!"