

**Year C-Epiphany 5-2019-Isaiah's Gloom and Jesus' Abundance**  
**February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019**  
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**Isaiah 6:1-13 and Luke 5:1-11**

**Isaiah's Gloom and Jesus' Abundance**

The Isaiah passage confuses me. Isaiah has a vision of the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, the hem of his robe fills the temple, six winged creatures attend him and one calls to another with the words "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." "The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke." I am filled with awe. I feel small.

It reminds me of the giant thrashing machine seen through my ten-year-old eyes as it roared into life. The long belt connecting the tractor with the monster machine began moving, the chains, sprockets, and fans began rotating, the pivots on the shaker pans began oscillating and the sharp knives flashed ominously awaiting the first bundle of oats. Settled dust hit by the blower fan blew out of the machine like smoke. The noise of it all was deafening making vocal communication futile. The powerful machine could take off your hand in a second if you got into the many chains and cogs or kill you if you were to fall into it.

The writer of Isaiah wants us to see God as holy, as Other, as mysterious and as powerful. It's a feeling we need or we will idolize ourselves or some exalted neighbor. It's the sense we get when we sing "Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty. Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee." God's glory is so bright the Seraphs use two of their wings to hide their eyes, his brightness like a welder's arc, cannot be endured by the naked eye.

Isaiah exclaims "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips." How is it that the bright light of truth coupled with absolute power immediately brings Isaiah to a sense of doom and filth? Suddenly he knows something is wrong with him and with his people, something that has to do with the words that come out of his mouth. Could it be that he and his people are living a destructive lie that can only be recognized in the light of God's glory?

A Seraph in the service of the powerful One does not contradict Isaiah's sense of his own unworthiness. Instead he flies to Isaiah with a pair of tongs holding a live coal taken from the altar. In my imagination I see the town blacksmith, pulling a fearsomely hot ember from his coal fire using a pair of tongs. The acrid smell of the dark building full of plowshares and cultivator shanks comes back to me and I hear the sizzle of hot metal tempering in water, steam rising up.

Then the Seraph touched Isaiah's mouth with the red-hot coal and says "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Did his lips sizzle like water when hit by white hot metal? What was being burned away? Was it the lie culture tells itself about the guilt of the victim and its own innocence?

With cauterized lips Isaiah overhears God who asks, "whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah spontaneously volunteers, "Here am I; send me!" God replied, "Go and say to this people: 'keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand. Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds and turn and be healed.'

God tells Isaiah to keep the people from seeing, hearing, and understanding the truth. I don't understand this section of Isaiah. It confuses me. Why would God send Isaiah with this message? The only explanation given is to prevent the people from turning and being healed. That makes no sense to me.

Isaiah doesn't question this command but does ask how long this hold on revelation shall last. God answers with: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitants, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the land. Even if a tenth part remains in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled." The passage from Isaiah paints a scene of almost total destruction. How do we make sense of that?

The passage from Isaiah ends with the tiniest bit of hope. "The holy seed is its stump." Isaiah's lips were touched by a hot ember. Were the unclean lips of Isaiah's people touched by this desolation and fire? Was it because they refused to listen, to see, to understand? Did they make their minds dull and so violence decimated their culture, killed and displaced their people and made the land itself into emptiness; with only smoldering stumps?

Isaiah has us thinking. Maybe they can't see, hear, or understand because they are in rivalry with God and God, not being in rivalry with them, demonstrates that by aiding them in what they want. When people are in rivalry with you their ears are blocked, their eyes become blind and their minds become dull to anything you wish to communicate to them. In the counseling profession sometimes the counselor has to use "paradoxical intent" in an attempt to break their fixation. The counselor instructs them to do what is bad for them so that in their rivalry they will actually do what is good for them. I think this is what the writer of Isaiah is doing. Knowing this, it clearly shows that the people of unclean lips are in rivalry with God.

Jesus stands on the shore of the Sea of Galilee teaching people. The people are so eager to hear they press in on him, pushing him toward the water. They are too close. He sees two boats;

one owned by a fisherman whose name is Peter, the other by two brothers, in business with Peter. Their names are James and John. Jesus calls to Peter and asks if he can sit in Peter's boat, offshore and teach from there. We don't know what Jesus was teaching them. When Jesus finished he asked Peter to put out into the deep water and let down his nets for a catch. Peter said they had been fishing all night and hadn't caught a thing but he would comply. They caught so many fish their nets began to tear. They called a second boat to hold the fish. Both boats were so full they both began to sink.

Peter, overwhelmed by the awe of abundance fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'" It's a similar reaction to Isaiah' when he saw God in a vision. Both say "go away" and make a confession of their unworthiness, acknowledging they are sinners. But there is a difference and it's crucial. Isaiah's vision features God's fearsome power while Jesus' demonstration features God's loving abundance. One vision centers on awesome power far away from us that Isaiah overhears. Jesus' demonstration is near us, in our midst, with no implicit or explicit threat. He is in the same boat as Peter, James and John.

Isaiah is told to work to shut people off from the revelation that will lead to their healing. He is then given a vision of violence, refugees on the move, vast emptiness, felled trees and burning stumps. Presumably their fear will drive them to God where they will find healing. I doubt it worked.

But it is very different for Jesus. Jesus tells Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Catching people with love and forgiveness, warming their hearts, calming their fears, healing their hurts and assuring them of the vocation of spreading this love everywhere they go. Isn't that a good message on this Sweet Heart Breakfast Sunday as we move toward Valentine's Day? Jesus confronted them with abundance; nets overflowing, boats full of fish, and fear quelled. Skepticism about their prospects for success contradicted by so much success it drives Peter to his knees.

Isaiah ends with "the holy seed is its stump." A charred stump, black as coal, still secretly contains the holy seed. It is a faint hope, a candle barely burning, hidden from view. But that has changed. Now we know that Jesus is that holy seed burned black by the human fires of vengeance and violence but not extinguished -- in fact, inextinguishable. When Peter, James and John had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed Jesus. Amen.