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Osler Mennonite Church

Here I am, Send me:
Romans 8:12-17; Isaiah 6:1-8

Good Morning Everyone,

In today's scripture we are told of Isaiah's dramatic call story. When I first read through this story, the depiction of God here felt very antithetical to how I understand God. It was hard for me to get past. We are given an image of God **seated on a high and lofty judgement seat**, and God is wearing this billowing robe with a train that fills up the entire temple. Then we have Seraphs, which literally translates "burning ones," and generally were drawn as fiery beings surrounded by lightning; and each Seraphs has six wings and appears above God's throne. This is quite an image. This is something that I would expect to find in a Marvel movie, but it's not who I picture when I pray.

Actually, the idea of God sitting high and lofty makes me uncomfortable and, as further verses show, the vision of this form of God makes Isaiah terrified. So, we have God, high up on a throne, huge billowing robes with flaming winged Seraphs above, and then they all start crying out. The cry is so forceful that the entire temple begins to shake and fills up with smoke. Imagining this scene, it is entirely understandable that Isaiah's reaction is to expect his doom. He's assuming that he is here to meet his ultimate judgement. Instead, one of the flaming Seraphs grabs an ember out of the altar using some tongs, touches it to Isaiah's mouth then declares his sins have been pardoned.

Told in this way, the story of Isaiah's call is fascinating, but doesn't translate terribly well to our circumstances today. There is so much symbolism crammed into this story that we need to unpack some of the context to get very far with it. The vision begins with a time stamp; this occurred in the same year as the death of Uzziah. Uzziah ruled in a relatively peaceful time in Judah, but this peace had been paid for at the cost of poor people on whose backs Judah's prosperity was built. It was peace for the privileged at the expense of the marginalized.

Which is to say it was not peace at all, but a system of exploitation. God is then depicted using the same spectacle and tropes of great rulers of the time: a high and mighty throne, a bordering on satirical amount of robe filling up the room. The Seraph's cry out in praise, emphasizing God's Holiness and Glory. The Glory of God is contrasted with the glory of Uzziah, because God's glory is not wielded to suck up more power and esteem, but to fill the earth with glory, a holiness that is for the benefit of the world, rather than power at the expense of others.

God sits on this high throne of judgement and, in doing so, reveals to Isaiah the corruption of the world around him. The prophet is awakened to the falseness of the peace within his community and it is to this that he declares **"I have unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."** Isaiah does not simply blame those in power but takes ownership over his complicity in the world he inhabits. Next, we have the Seraphs come over with the burning ember to touch to Isaiah's lips. This is not something Isaiah would have expected. Usually, forgiveness was granted after an offering and sacrifice had been made. But here, the Seraph comes to him and says that Isaiah's sins have been removed. The translation here actually indicates that his corruption has been blotted out or departed, meaning that the effects of the wrongful actions have been ended. It is a forgiveness that asks for no guilt to be left on Isaiah's shoulders.

After this God speaks again. Not an order or even a direct call to Isaiah. Instead, it is simply an open ask for volunteers **"whom shall I send? Who will go for us?"** This Divine Sovereignty is again contrasted with that of earthly kingdoms. There is no conscription here, but instead an open invitation to take part in this work. And Isaiah responds of course **"Here I am, send me."**

Reading our Romans text in tandem with this story, the abstracts of flesh and spirit seem to be rooted into the story of the two separate rulers. Setting up these verses, Romans declares that the covenant of God is fulfilled in Christ and the Spirit and that all creation will be renewed, that this change is revealed in the character of

God's people. **If you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if you live by the Spirit, you will put to death the evil deeds of the body and you will live.** When reflecting on Isaiah's story, these verses seem to fit well into the societal injustices of that time. "If you live according to the rules of society you will continue to bring destruction, but if you will live by the way of God, listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, you will overcome these destructive systems of the world and will flourish." It is not a rejection of our God-created bodies; it is a recognition of the present body of power. It is saying that our measure of who is in charge, the powerful ruler we are to follow, is not from a being that will turn back into dust. In other words, it is not in the King Uzziah's of the world that we should model our lives after, pursuing comfort at the expense of others. Rather we are invited to claim our place as children of God, led by the Spirit to participate in all that is good in us and in this world.

Our lectionary hands us these two texts, the verses selected and cut out to compliment one another and give us a united vision of the opportunity to answer God's call. To add our voices crying out "**Abba**" in fond familiarity and standing alongside Isaiah saying "**Send Me.**" While this work of selection makes for an easy sermon title, it leaves us with a story cut short. It gives us the slogan of the movement without the grit of the work. It gives me the same uncomfortable feeling as attending a parade or sharing a post without feeling attached to the follow through. The same discomfort that many of us feel when we acknowledge our presence on Treaty Land, but aren't sure what actions we are truly taking to live as treaty people. So, we are going to turn back to the Isaiah scripture, and see what happens when we push past the tidy bow that wraps up our lectionary text.

Continuing on in Isaiah 6, I will read the remainder of this call narrative ...
[Isaiah 6:9-13].

Isaiah has only just awakened to the corruption around him, and his participation in it. He has volunteered, bravely, to enter into a new way of being, to assist wherever he can. And this is the assignment that is given to him. This is the work of the prophet. There is no dipping a toe in for Isaiah; answering God's call is going to be immediately hard and isolating. As George defined for us last Sunday, in modern times we often think of prophets as people who look far into the future – something akin to an oracle. But biblical Prophets were often called instead to simply describe what was happening around them, to be fierce truth tellers in the face of denial, and to hold society accountable to the destruction that resulted. They also continue to hold out, upon God's insistence – that renewal is still possible, that hope prevails. Prophets were answering a call to witness what is, and to declare again and again what can be. Isaiah is handed a job description that says 'nobody is going to listen, or see your perspective, and everything is going to be destroyed.' We need these verses read aloud in our churches, because without them we can pretend that it is possible to remain in our comfort zones and claim to be doing the work.

In 2020, every Mennonite Pastor in Canada General Conference was mailed a copy of Drew G. I. Hart's newest book *Who Will Be a Witness*. This book is written for communities of faith who want to live out the call of Jesus to organize for justice in the neighbourhoods around them. It is a call to put hands and feet to our anabaptist theology. While he covers many important topics, he emphasizes the theme of becoming communities of prophetic discomfort, of creating space in our congregations for the uncomfortable feeling that comes with growing in God's Spirit. I am going to share a striking example from his book, shortened here for the sake of time. **Excerpt from page 194-196**

The prophetic work of truth telling requires us to set down pride in pursuit of further good. It is to respond as Isaiah did, realizing **my lips are unclean, and so are the lips of those around me** and then choosing a different path. To name where we have and continue to do wrong.

Hart declares that prophetic words reveal God’s dream for us, as well as where we have departed from it. It is uncomfortable dismantling work, that uproots what we know, to build something new. In this story we are given the example of not only the brave prophetic woman, but also the strength of a community that can receive this truth telling and choose to respond by changing their direction. The undoing of King Uzziah’s ‘peace for the privileged’ felt like a threat to the very foundation of their society, and so Judah railed against Isaiah’s words. But to be a community of the Spirit means allowing ourselves to be reshaped over and over again. To have the humility and grace of the pastor leading worship at Harts church, someone that listened and got up to say another prayer, embodying what they had learned.

It is in the final verses of Isaiah 6 that we receive a lasting hope. YHWH declares that there is growth to be done in this dismantling, that not everything will be destroyed for **“one-tenth will remain... like an oak that burns to the ground in fire, then is cut down, leaving only a stump – in that stump is the holy seed!”** We are not left with nothing in the unravelling. We are left as co-heirs of Christ, guided by the Spirit, sharing in the journey of the renewal of this land. And it is with this understanding, knowing the mistakes that we have made and with a determined grit of what we are in for – that we can stand up to volunteer, hands shaking and voices quivering and declare **“Here I am, send me.”** Amen.

Sources Used: New Interpreters Bible Commentary, New Believers Bible Commentary, Who Will Be a Witness by Drew G.I. Hart

Benediction (VT Worship Leader #418)

From where we are
to where you need us

Jesus, now lead on.

From the familiarity of what we know
to the wonder of what you will reveal:

Jesus, now lead on.

To Transform the fabric of this world
until it resembles the shape of your kindom:

Jesus, now lead on.