

Clean Coal
Trinity Sunday
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Text: Isaiah 6

I want to explore with you that call story from Isaiah, about Isaiah. But as we do so, I'm afraid that I need to deal with a couple of potential stumbling blocks that I see in this story right from the start. The first stumbling block could be summarized as: OUCH!!! – because did you notice what happens in this vision of Isaiah? – an angel flies over to Isaiah with a pair of tongs holding a burning hot coal and the angel touches that live coal to Isaiah's lips. I know this passage is meant to inspire holy mystery and awe, but the burning coal to the lips is what gets my squeamish attention - I know it's just an image, a vision, but OUCH! – it is painful for me to image it.

And beyond the stumbling block of the literal, figurative, pain of the image, I think the image is problematic too in how it seems to play into, play out, a particular theological thread that emphasizes the impurity, the sinfulness, the uncleanness of humanity – humanity in need of a radical cleansing from God; and you know that I have plenty of times reflected on that as a theological thread that I think a lot of folks at Hope Church (and plenty of folks who aren't a part of church at all) have experienced as quite a tangle when it comes to faith. It is a thread that is part of a theological cloth that many people have experienced as mainly about condemnation and fear, about obligation and rigidity – with a message of divine judgment and human unworthiness at the core– and even spun with a strong sense of uncertainty and anxiety about whether one is held in God's love and grace at all. Which could be summarized also as: OUCH! – a burning coal to the soul. That is the theological narrative you could hear in this story – and perhaps you have a sense of what you think that I am going to say about that – theological progressive that you think me to be – but stay tuned and see if what I say is what you think I'm going to say... but for now, let's just name it as a stumbling block – the painful image and the theology of judgment that it plays into.

But I want to name another stumbling block too – and this is about one of my pet peeves as a minister – which has to do with a pet peeve about ministers! Here in this Isaiah story there is a “call” that happens: the voice of God asks ‘whom shall I send...?’ and Isaiah responds ‘Here I am – send me.’ That’s good! But...what I have found to often be the case is that the particular vocation of those called to ordained ministry – minister types such as us - hijack this story as being for and about only them. It has come to be the case that the idea of “calling” is used most often about, and at times reserved for, being an ordained minister of some sort – it’s a skewed view of call too often reinforced in obvious and subtle ways. And one way of looking at this Isaiah story is that it is perpetuating just such a view of things – it can be read to have a very exclusive tone to it: a special role for Isaiah, set aside as a prophet, called by the very voice of the Lord. This dramatic vision could be, has been, used to perpetuate a message that a “call” is only for a chosen few, we say – and the rest of you are bystanders...

Alright – so those are the stumbling blocks – or perhaps what I think those are are the engrained ways that we could tend to use as a framework for listening to this story; particular frameworks engrained in us about things like judgment and calling that combine to picture this as a story about unworthiness and exclusivity. Well, that’s not a picture that I find suitable for framing, so let’s try something different. Let’s try instead using as a frame for this story the actual frame that the story gives – what a concept! - and what I mean by that, is that we need to go to the beginning of this story first, and listen to this:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of the glory of the LORD.”

Isaiah’s vision begins with God and who God is: a heavenly chorus about the holiness of God. What does that mean for God to be “holy”? – seems like we don’t use “holy” with much substance these days. I think as we often use it, it’s either with a negative tone to it: someone being ‘holier than thou’, holy as the realm of the self-righteous; or we use it as a peculiar part of interjections: ‘holy cow that’s delicious’ or ‘holy moly that’s surprising!’ And occasionally we use it more positively and substantively too – people will speak of a “holy moment” that is

meaningful. But it is probably best to set aside how we often use holy if we are to try to capture what “holy” is expressing about God in this vision. “Holy” is used very, very often about God particularly in the Hebrew scriptures – and it’s such an interesting, challenging, word to try to get a grasp of. “Holy” has to do at its core with expressing how God is wholly – w -h -o -l -l - y - other - completely distinct from and without comparison in creation; it is a word of awe and praise at the mystery of God’s being – the LORD God, Yahweh. But then this holiness of God who is wholly other is what reveals the goodness of all God has made: “holy is the LORD, the earth is full of God’s glory” – the holiness of God is reflected in a world created to give glory to God. So “holy” holds within it a sense of goodness, of completeness, of shalom - the fulness of creation held in God’s blessing.

“holy, holy, holy is the LORD” – when the vision starts there, it gives us a different frame for the coal. This is not about God judging Isaiah – what you suddenly notice is that it is ISAIAH who judges himself! – encountered with the holiness of God, Isaiah has a deep sense of his own un-holiness: ‘woe is me – I am lost – I am unclean!’ Part of the reality of a relationship with God is to have a deep sense of the gulf between God’s holiness and our brokenness, of the ways in which we do not reflect God’s glory. But in the context of the holiness of God, the purpose of this contrast is not about shame or fear or condemnation, but rather about the depth of our need to turn to God.

When I said earlier that I might not say what you think that I’m going to say about this part of the vision, what I mean is that with some of the theological work I’ve been percolating on and engaging with Hope Church about – looking at salvation less as payment to God and more as freedom given by God – what can happen is that it may seem that I want to shy away from the reality that we do bad things. I notice now that if there is a passage about sin or judgment, that people wonder if I might try to ignore that or explain that away – and I can understand that wondering. But just because religious language around human shortcomings and divine judgment has promoted a faith of fear and condemnation, that doesn’t mean the answer is to throw out the reality of our shortcomings – no: there is a deep need for us to

recognize and speak of how we fall short – but just as deep is the need to see that the heart of God is not fueled by retribution but by the desire to have our lives glorify God; the holiness of God is the grace, the cleansing, the calling that shapes our lives into expressions of God’s glory. That burning coal *is* grace - the holiness of God reaching out in response to our cry for the touch of God’s presence – cleansing, renewing, calling.

Starting with ‘holy, holy, holy is the Lord...’ – it shapes how we understand the coal, and it also shapes how we hear the call part of this vision. This call is about Isaiah, but it is not just about him – do you notice that right away Isaiah says “I am a person of unclean lips AND I live among a people of unclean lips”? – **all** stand in need of this encounter with the holiness of God. The holiness of God is the shared source for calling; and to have one’s life reflect the glory of God is the shared purpose of calling. Certainly in Scripture there is a pattern of particular people discerning particular calls, special calls to carry out God’s will – but the intention of those particular calls is always to bring about something far beyond that person – it is always about the call to all God’s people to glorify God in ways that bring wholeness to God’s world - the call for all of life to echo ‘holy, holy, holy is the Lord’... That is the purpose of coal and call – to tune our lives to that song, knowing that we are created to glorify a holy God through the goodness and grace of life. It reminds me of the Pentecost story last Sunday – followers of Christ finding their voices through the wind and fire of the Spirit –Pastor Beth preaching about our youth and each of us being joined to that current of the Spirit’s calling.

But then there is the end of this story too – the ending which is the life of Isaiah after this vision. As crucial as it is to begin with “holy, holy” in order to understand the coal and call in this story, it is also important to realize where this vision of coal and call leads Isaiah – which is to a very challenging road ahead. Isaiah is given a word from God that challenges the powers of the day, that seeks to transform the culture of the day – he is a voice calling for repentance, change, renewal – he expresses the anger of God, the compassion of God, the vision of God in a broken world – he is a voice that goes against the currents of the day. It’s

not always – not often – easy to live into the call God gives to us...whatever that may look like in your life – however you are called to bring wholeness into life that glorifies God...that call often puts one at odds with the powers of our day – of our culture – sometimes even of the church. And I don't intend an energy for that to sound "holier than thou", setting us up as a righteous remnant in a broken world. What I mean is that day to day it is an act of faith and courage to tune our lives to the call to bring God's glory into the world: in the daily choices of relationships and decisions – in the broader scope of public and religious and community life. Because the simple truth is that within us and around us there is much that is not tuned to that calling from God – things obvious and subtle which seek to suppress God's glory and diminish God's world – and we are called to witness to a different path.

This coal and call business is challenging - and that is why when we see what is ahead, that we must always look to the song with which this vision begins – 'holy, holy, holy is the LORD – the whole earth is full of God's glory' That song tunes our lives to God's grace and goodness as our strength; that song renews us in gratitude and joy; that song centers us that in the challenges we face, we do so in the truth that it is God who is before and beyond and within all of the faithfulness we seek. When our lives individually and together are tuned to this song - 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord...' - we will have the courage for it to echo in our lives to the glory of God, sounding something like this: "here I am, Lord – send me" AMEN.