

Isaiah 6: 1-8 "In the Year" Rev. Janet Chapman 5/31/21

In the year 2021, Memorial Day weekend will go down as the time much of America began to slowly emerge from under its protective shell; we are rising up to take a peek at life outside our four walls; some have already headed off for parts unknown while others are considering plans for upcoming vacations, believing by the 4th of July, our nation's independence from COVID will finally have taken hold. I am in that latter group and am looking forward to finally getting that full-fledged tourist experience of Washington DC and New York. One of the sites I hope to see as I reflect on our nation's heroes this weekend is the sculpted head of Abraham Lincoln in the nation's Capitol. This is probably because of the story behind its creation by sculptor Gutzon Borglum. You see Borglum had started with a large square block of stone in his studio, and as the face of Lincoln was just becoming recognizable in the stone, a young girl was visiting the studio with her parents. She looked at the half-done face of Lincoln, her eyes registering wonder and awe. She stared at the piece for a long while and then ran to the sculptor and asked, "Is that Abraham Lincoln?" "Yes," he replied. The little girl said, "Well, how in the world did you know that he was in that block of stone?" How in the world, indeed?

In the year that King Uzziah died, our scripture begins. It is not a careless or haphazard beginning. There is much beneath the surface of those words that might miss our eye. Just as a sculptor sees past a lump of rock to the face within, so we are invited to see past those brief 7 words to a wealth of information being handed to us. It sets the entire context for why this encounter between Isaiah and God is so significant that it is one of the most familiar Old Testament or Hebrew texts we have. It brings up a rush of memories to those who lived through it, sort of like saying "In the year that Martin Luther King was shot" and instantly I am transported back to being nearly 6, sitting in front of a black and white TV, trying to figure out why what the reporter was making my mom cry. I just wanted to turn the stupid thing off and comfort her. Where were you "In the year we landed on the moon" or "In the year the World Trade Center was attacked" or "In the year the COVID vaccine changed the world"? All of these are ingrained in the memories of those who lived it and so it was "In the year that King Uzziah died." The circumstances are different, but the questions people ask are quite similar. What will happen to us, to our nation? Are my children safe? What does this mean for economic

conditions, education, and so on? In Isaiah's time, Uzziah was a king that had brought much prosperity, military power, and political influence to the kingdom. But Uzziah forgot he was an earthly king and he challenged the sacred worship of the temple. His narcissism and arrogance resulted in a case of leprosy which eventually brought his death. That death made the whole nation weak and at risk to outside invaders.

It is in the midst of a year of separation, fear, and disconnection that Isaiah sees a vision which makes a clear distinction between God and humanity. Isaiah is in the middle of worshipping in the temple when things go sideways in a scene which is worthy of the great filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille. Yahweh's robe fills the temple, six-winged creatures fly around shouting and the temple is rocked with their sound, and smoke adds this eerie haze to the frame. The six-winged creatures are called seraphs. They use two wings to fly in the air, and then two wings each to hide their enormous and monstrous faces and feet. However, in Hebrew the word "feet" is more than once used as a euphemism for genitals. So basically, they are hiding their enormous and monstrous genitals - don't think too hard on this or you may have nightmares. The camera shot has been focused on the vast panorama above and the abruptly, the camera descends back to Isaiah who cries out in horror, "Woe is me, surely I am doomed, because I am one of sinful lips, and I live among people of sinful lips; my own eyes have seen the king, Yahweh of the armies." Yahweh immediately recognizes the shock of the prophet and sends one of the seraphs to act. This act is not one of comfort or consolation but rather is a burning coal on the mouth. Then, as John Holbert notes, the seraph announces in delicious understatement, "Look! This has touched your lips..." At this point, Isaiah is probably saying, "Duh, no kidding! I thought it touched my feet...oh wait, that's something else in Hebrew so yeah let's just stick with the lips, that's good." The seraph continues, "Your sin has left and your guilt is covered." With that, the seraph makes it known that the will of God is to forgive sin in order to prepare the prophet for service to God. Having accepted forgiveness, it is only then that Isaiah is able to hear God's call to serve; "Whom shall I send?" says God. "Here I am," Isaiah responds, "Send me."

It is important to note that very few people in scripture actually have seen the Lord, but this is one of those rare cases. Equally so, very, very few people in our history have ever had

such a vision and maybe some of you are thanking your lucky stars for that. That doesn't mean we don't have our own experiences of awe in the presence of God. They come in a variety of ways, certainly through worship but also out in nature, in private devotion and meditation, in close relationships with others, in giving of one's self to others, and in everyday life. When you live in connection with the Spirit of God, the splendor and beauty of God breaks through, often in unexpected times and places, that lead us to awe. In fact, new research in psychology indicates that more than any other emotion, awe leads us out of our narrow self-interest in to seek the well-being of the larger group. That is a psychological way of saying that awe leads to mission and service, to saying, "Here I am Lord, send me."

I will never forget my first trip to the giant redwoods on the coast. We drove our car through one of those giants and it was mind-boggling. When walking through the forest, even the smallest child stopped her giggling and chattering to look up. You could not hear a sound of any kind. They stood 200-300 feet high, and you had to tip your neck back as far as it would go to see the needles at the top. They made their own twilight out of the bright California day. There was a stillness and stateliness about them that seemed to become part of you as you stood there stunned by the sight of them. They had been growing in that place for over 2000 years. They are interconnected by this vast and limitless network which would put the world wide web to shame. Standing amongst them made me feel like all this time I had been mistaken about what a Tree really was. Maybe when people met Jesus for the first time, heard him teach, saw his compassion with the poor, or his forgiveness when he hung on the cross, maybe they felt something similar to that kind of awe, when for the very first time in their lives they found themselves looking at a Human Being as God created us to be. Experiencing such awe, encountering God face to face even in the ordinary days, leads us to lay our lives before God and serve both God and humanity.

There is a poem by Michael Coffey which you may have heard before, but it summarizes for me that sacred awe available to all of us which inspires divine service, even in the year 2021. It is called "God's Bathrobe." "God sat on Sunday in her Adirondack chair... reading the New York Times and sipping strawberry lemonade... her pink robe flowing down to the ground... the garment hem was fluff and frill... and it spilled holiness down into the sanctuary... into the cup

and the nostrils of the singing people... one thread trickled loveliness into a funeral rite... as the mourners looked in the face of death... and hear the story of a life truer than goodness... a torn piece of the robe's edge flopped onto... a war in Syria and caused heartbeats to skip and soldiers looked into themselves deeply... one threadbare strand of the divine belt ... almost knocked over a polar bear floating on a loose berg in the warming sea... one silky string wove its way through Jesus' cross... and tied itself to desert-parched immigrants with swollen tongues and a woman with ovarian cancer and two young sons... you won't believe this, but a single hair-thin fiber... floated onto the yacht of a rich man and he gasped when he saw everything as it really was... the hem fell to and fro across the universe... filling space and time and gaps between the sub-atomic world with the effervescent presence of the One who is the Is... and even in the slight space between lovers in bed... the holiness flows and wakes up the body to feel beyond the feeling and know beyond the knowing... and even as we monotheize and trinitize... and speculate and doubt even our doubting... the threads of holiness trickle into our lives... and the seraphim keep singing "holy, holy, holy" and flapping their wings like baby birds... and God says: "give it a rest awhile" ... and God takes another sip of her summertime drink and smiles at the way you are hearing this vision now and hums: "It's a good day to be God." And I will add, it's a good day to be human as God created us to be in the year 2021.