

Foothills Congregational Church
United church of Christ
461 Orange Ave., Los Altos, CA 94022

The Rev. Dr. Chris Breedlove
Trinity Sunday
May 27, 2018

Holy Ground

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Isaiah 6: 1-8

The dating of the whole collection of Isaiah ranges from the eighth century BCE (Before the Common Era) to the mid-6th century BCE. In chapter six, we read about the prophet Isaiah's call to prophetic ministry, where he finds himself on holy ground-- and that ground, holy ground, as it is for us at times, is disorienting and shaky.

I think we are always on holy ground, it's just that we are not awakened to experience.

I In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.

Uzziah died somewhere around the time of 742 to 736 BCE (NIB, VI, Isaiah); the ending of both Uzziah and Isaiah name ("iah") is a derivative of the name for God, and also possibly indicated that they both belonged to a royal family-- one was a politician (Uzziah) and the other, his cousin perhaps, was a prophet (Isaiah).

The term "prophet" and "prophetic" is not as much about predicting the future as it is more of the task of the prophet to proclaim the judgment of God and God's call to repentance; the prophet proclaims and declares God's story over and above the story of empire. In this case, the Book of Isaiah, there are several empire systems that Isaiah's message of "the word of the LORD" is contrasted against.

The task of the prophet, and the preacher for that matter, is "*to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable*" (a saying borrowed from the newspaper industry and adapted by preachers sometime ago-- 1980s?). Isaiah at times seems to be more affliction than comfort-- but those were the times he lived and prophesied among.

Uzziah had been king for about 40 years, and after his death the empire of Assyria was an imminent threat to the southern kingdom, Judah. Up to that point, Uzziah was the only king that Isaiah had known. One can imagine how uncertain and anxious those days must have been-- death of the nation's leader with war and oppression afoot. War is always a deadly disruptive affair.

Our own history and country too is familiar with the destructive nature of war. For every day of life that my children have know in this world, the U.S has been at war; that's a disconcerting and tragic reality— in my lifetime, and in the lifetime of my children, war has been normalized.

A seldom mentioned history of Memorial Day included Julia Ward Howe's (sounding like a prophet herself) earnest desire for peace (a few years after the first celebrations of Memorial Day) "A Mothers' Day Proclamation":

Our husbands shall not come to us reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause.

Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy, and patience. . . .

From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says, "Disarm, Disarm!"

The sword of murder is not the balance of justice! Blood does not wipe out dishonor nor violence indicate possession.

Howe's prophetic cry echoes that of the prophet of Isaiah in an earlier chapter, "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." (2.4)

2 Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.

With the mentioning of these strange creatures (seraphim is plural for seraph) it's helpful to make a point about that an entirely literal reading of Isaiah is a scary proposition. Imaginative imagery, metaphorical device and hyperbole were common communicative and writing voices for the many of the writers in Scripture.

So, I don't think there really are creatures like seraphim as much as I think that the biblical authors were using imagery and imagination to tell a story that captures one's' imagination; that is, how do you talk about God in powerful ways? The prophet and biblical writers created compelling narratives that resonated within the hearts and minds of the people-- Seraphs (the burning ones or the firey ones) makes me think of the Game of Thrones dragons. Also, with two of their six wings the seraphim "covered their feet"-- an euphemism for their genital parts.

3 And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;

the whole earth is full of his glory."

The three mentions of Holy was a way to state that God is the holiest-- Hebrew doesn't have superlative the same way that other languages employ.

Isaiah, caught up in a vision, finds himself of holy ground. We might recall when Moses was before God on holy ground, or when the prophet Elijah was in the cave and God passed by. Holy ground is also a disorienting affair.

What does "holy" mean?

We could think of it in terms of morality. Tillich lists descriptors for what holy entails: “moral perfection, purity, goodness, truth, and justice” (The Shaking of the Foundations, 90)

Also, we can look back to previous passages in Isaiah that name what a holy God desires of us:

- 1.17 “Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow,”
- 5.7b “[God] looked for justice, but saw bloodshed: for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.”
- 5. 16 “The LORD Almighty will be exalted by ... justice, and the holy God will be proved holy by ... righteous acts.”

Whatever mystical essence holiness is, is a mystery, but the reverberations of the Holy includes the presence of justice and righteousness.

Whatever God is (we struggle to grasp), God is something more than human, and yet, God is also deeply a part of the human experience and longing.

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

The scene here is that of, perhaps, how priest in the Temple burned incense to obscure the holy of holies. To see God face to face was certain death (Exodus 33.20)

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.”

Isaiah in the presence of the divine, even just in the entourage of God’s seraphim’s and court, keenly felt his vulnerable mortality and humanity. All Isaiah could do at this point was to shutter in his bare and fragile humanity.

God was Holy, Isaiah was not;

God was immortal, and Isaiah was not.

God desired justice and righteousness;

And the people of God at that time were not just or righteous.

A couple of years ago, I found myself on holy ground— and it was indeed unnerving. I was stargazing and lost my sense of self while gazing into the multidimensional depth of the milky way galaxy; I was suddenly, and keenly, aware of my finitude and morality— it was as close to a moment of existential angst as I have ever experienced. From that moment, I’ve been hyper aware of the thin frailty of the here and now— of the Spirit that as Paul preached, “We live in, move in, exist in.” (Paraphrased: Acts 17); or to reframe Paul's affirmation by alternating subjects: “God lives in us, God exists in us. God is the holy ground of our being.”

6 Then one of the seraphim 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.”

“Fire”, or in this case a “live coal”, as mentioned in this past Pentecost Sunday was a symbol of prophetic calling and power. Isaiah needed forgiveness and power, God responded to Isaiah’s humility and confessed limitations. Humbleness is often a good thing-- especially in the presence of flying serpent creature juggling live coals (oh, how scary literal readings of scripture like this must be for some readers!).

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!”

Vs. 8 is a challenging stopping point for us, and one where we seek application in our daily lived out faith-- are we present before the holy? Willing to be sent to prophetically proclaim justice and righteousness, to defend the cause of the fatherless, to care for the widowed, to say no to war and yes to just-peace? Amen.