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Isaiah 6:1-8

Out of the Smoke

It was the eighth century B.C. The prophet Isaiah was in the temple of Jerusalem for one of its big festivals, watching the priests perform their ritual duties. The sacred space was thick with incense smoke; the sound of hymns filled the air. Before Isaiah was the golden ark of the covenant with its carved winged attendants and its shape like a royal throne. Suddenly Isaiah looked again and the winged carvings became literal six-winged seraphim next to a huge throne of gold. The rising smoke from the incense became the flowing robe of the living God. The priests' hymns became heavenly choirs singing "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts." It changed from the temple of God to the presence of God, and out of the smoke, Isaiah heard a call that would change his life.

As an earthquake rumbled beneath him, Isaiah was keenly aware of his mortal status in the midst of the immortal, his own sinfulness in the presence of the divine. For Isaiah, as is true for all of us, there came a moment when he remembered his own frailty and the great gap between his ability and the Lord's omnipotence and power. So Isaiah cried out, "*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.*" Why lips? Lips are the threshold for the soul. Open your mouth to speak and part of your innermost being escapes. If there is truth within you, then truth will emerge. If there is fear and confusion within you, then it will be seen in your trembling lips. But woe to those who speak falsehood from their lips. When Jesus was angry at the false teachers and scribes, he said, *You hypocrites! Not what goes into the mouth defiles a person but what comes out of the mouth is what defiles. This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.* (Mt 15:7-11)

In the vision of Isaiah, he found himself in the presence of God and felt totally overwhelmed. Then out of smoke came a live, glowing coal, which touched Isaiah's lips. Through God's holiness and grace, what was unclean was now made clean. Guilt and sin were wiped away and forgiven. To capture this idea, Isaiah used images from the temple – coals taken from the altar of God, fire burning away impurities, fire which cleanses and strengthens and enlivens all at the same time. Then the Lord asked, "Who will go for us?" and Isaiah offered a quick answer, which in English is translated as, "Here am I, send me!" But in the Hebrew it is much shorter and more to the point. God asked, "Who will go for us?" and Isaiah shouted back one word, "Hineni; I'm ready!"

Listen well: The direction of faith is always a movement toward clarity. Some scientists may scoff at that remark. Even some churchgoers may question the truth of that statement, given the complexity associated with many Christian doctrines, like the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, resurrection and providence of God. You can describe those doctrines as simply ways to talk about the manifold character of God (Trinity), a God who is intimately associated with this earth (incarnation), whose power is stronger than death itself (resurrection), and whose will is done through the choices

and circumstances of our daily lives (providence). But many people still struggle with the idea that to find faith is to find clarity for your life. Why is that?

One reason for this is that we don't tell faith testimonies often enough. In this day and age of Jerry Springer and Oprah, of bloggers and Facebook and Twitter, we routinely share the most intimate details of our life except for our faith stories. We tell people what we're doing and how we're feeling right now; we tell stories about our past, describing to kids about the day they were born or how we met our partners for the first time. Remind me to tell you sometime the true story of a friend of mine who took his girlfriend to a nice restaurant to propose to her. He wanted to dress up as a knight in armor, but he could only afford to rent the helmet. So he went into the restroom, wrapped himself in aluminum foil, put on the helmet, and returned to their table with a ring in his hand. As he knelt before her, all the young woman could think of was that she was being proposed to by a giant baked potato.

Stories like that we gladly tell over and over again. Faith testimonies, though, are much less common in our story-telling repertoire. But go downstairs here and attend a Good Samaritan service any given Sunday. You will hear people tell about emerging from the fog of crack addiction and finding their way by God's grace. You will hear testimonies of people who are sober now for six months or six years, thanks to groups and friends and a faith in the God of second chances. And don't kid yourself – there are plenty of those same stories in these pews in this service. People who struggled with addiction and alcoholism; people scarred by broken relationships, broken marriages, broken dreams; people unsure some days whether to get out of bed or who've wondered what the point of it all is until something happened spiritually to them. That doesn't mean they always know where they're heading, but at least they know they are standing on solid ground, the rock of Christ, as they find their way forward.

Faith testimonies don't need to be exceptionally dramatic. I know that mine isn't. I grew up being taken to church and as a teen found a place for myself in the congregation. When I was in high school, after a particular Sunday School lesson, I told my parents that I wanted to become a minister. I stored that conviction away while I studied other things in college. But one day when I was a junior, I remember thinking about God, slowly, methodically, and realizing that if Jesus rose from the dead, then all the categories of this world were now changed by that act of transformative, radical love. I didn't say "Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips." But I did repeat in my head something like the verse from Psalm 8, "Who are we that Thou art mindful of us?" I can still picture that day quite clearly. And yes, I still have questions and things I struggle with, but I've never looked back from that moment of new-found clarity.

Out of the haze of their lives, Peter and Andrew were called to leave their nets and become disciples. Out of the fog of dishonesty, Jesus called Matthew away from his tax collector's booth. Out of whatever smoke and confusion shrouds you in your life, God comes to you. God takes the initiative. As Isaiah saw it, it took the form of a glowing coal – something that cleanses and purifies. That clarifies and enlivens. Something that we would never have the power to accomplish by ourselves; but when it is freely offered to us by grace, it makes all the difference in the world. God comes near to us, in our

busted-up, mixed-up, confused states of daily being and touches us – our lips, our hearts, whatever – and makes us something new, something noble, something whole. Suddenly our eyes are opened and we see differently; our ears are unplugged and we hear as if for the first time. We understand with a clarity that simply was not possible while lost in the fog and smoke and confusion of our prior life. And then comes a call – “Who will go for me?” says the Lord. And as people hungry for a purpose and direction and hope for their lives, we find ourselves saying, “Hineni; I’m ready.”

Now, do we need to hear this call more than once? In most cases, yes. But that’s alright. We’re open every Sunday; come back next week. Look, the communion meal is ready for you today. Food and fellowship to sustain you for the coming days. And don’t worry; we’ll offer it again next month. So come join us again. Come listen to the testimonies of faith from Isaiah and the other bible characters, as well as from the characters next to you in the pews. Hear it in the Christmas stories, the amazing Easter stories, and the Pentecost stories. And don’t fret if your memory isn’t as good as it once was; we’ll repeat the stories over and over again, year after year. Because in them we find clarity, we find hope, we find life.

That’s enough words for now. Soon we’ll share a meal. You’re all welcome here. And if you would describe your soul this morning as being cloudy and overcast, then allow something to be handed to you – a piece of bread, something to drink, a meal reminding us of the God who not only offered the cleansing ember of coal but the redeeming Son and Savior. Take, eat, and then listen as your own lips will soon say, “Hineni! I’m ready!” Thanks be to God.

AMEN