

September 13, 2020 | Journey worship service

TEXT: [Isaiah 6:1–8](#)

TITLE: Moving Toward Clarity

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

The prophet Isaiah had a vision back in the eighth century B.C. It drew upon both his literal experiences in the temple of Jerusalem and one specific, miraculous moment in which Isaiah saw himself at the foot of the throne of God. Isaiah was quite familiar with the Jerusalem temple festivals. There would be priests in robes, smoking containers of incense making the air thick and fragrant; and inside the Holy of Holies, there would be the sacred ark of the covenant decorated with six-winged angelic attendants called seraphim. Hymns would be sung in the temple, calling out “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts.”

At some point, either right there in the temple itself or as he remembered one of these sacred rituals, Isaiah had a powerful vision. Through the smoke and haze he saw God sitting on a throne. God’s robe filled the temple and the ground shook beneath his feet. Isaiah panicked. He cried out, “*Woe is me! I am lost for I am unworthy to be in the presence of the Lord.*” He went on to say, “*I am a man of unclean lips.*” Now, why lips? Well, lips are in many ways the threshold for our souls. Open your mouth to speak and part of who you are, part of your innermost being escapes. If there is truth in you, then truth emerges. If there is fear or confusion or lies within you, then your lips will pour forth falsehood—something unworthy to bring before the Lord. Remember when Jesus was angry at some false teachers, he snapped at them and said, “You hypocrites! It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person but what comes out of their mouth is what defiles them. It does no good to honor me with your lips when your hearts are far from me.” (Paraphrase of Matthew 15:7–11)

In that moment, Isaiah felt unworthy, confused, and unsure what to do next. So God acted. God took the first step. Out of the smoke a glowing coal was extended in a pair of tongs and it touched Isaiah’s lips. This is not about magic or medicine; it is about grace. Guilt and sin, unworthiness before what is holy, were taken away by the one who is holy. God changed things for the good right then. Suddenly Isaiah heard God asking for a partner, an advocate who would go and use those human lips to speak what is true and healing. God asked: “Who will go for us?” And Isaiah shouted back “Here am I, send me!” Actually in Hebrew it is much shorter and to the point. It is the single word “Hineni” which means “I’m here!” That ‘s a great word—“Hineni.” Remember it.

Now, here’s why Isaiah’s vision is so important for each of us today. The direction of faith always moves toward clarity. (Repeat) This may be a surprising assertion. People often say they have lots of questions about faith. They tell me they don’t understand things like the Trinity, the incarnation, how the resurrection of Jesus happened and how the providence of God actually works. You may well have the same questions yourself. So we could sit down together and I could go into long explanations about how the Trinity is how we talk about the diverse character of God, the incarnation of God in Christ reminds us that God is intimately connected with all life on earth, the resurrection

reassures us that God's loving power is stronger than death, and providence is how we affirm that God is at work in all the choices of our daily life. It is possible that my answers will only raise more questions for you. If so, you would be right to wonder how it is that the direction of faith always moves toward clarity.

Part of the problem is that we don't tell our faith testimonies enough. We talk, text and tweet about everything except for our faith stories. We are hesitant to share how we have come to believe in God and in Christ Jesus. Perhaps we think our faith isn't strong enough to be held up as an example to someone else—like we too are people of unclean lips and doubts, so it is best not to say too much about our personal faith lives. But something moved us toward God in our life—to trust that good is stronger than evil—and whatever led to that decision was a movement toward clarity. And those stories are always worth sharing.

We are slowly opening our church building back up. For the next three Sundays there will be a small group of church members present in the courtyard as we live stream our 11:00 a.m. service. And in the coming days, a couple 12-step groups will finally be able to return to our church for their weekly meetings. These AA and NA meetings depend upon telling stories—testimonies of what it feels like to consciously choose to stay drug-free for one more week; stories about being reconciled to family members and able to break the cycle of addiction; stories about having a faith foundation upon which to build a new life. Moving from darkness to light, from despair to joy, from confusion to clarity—those are faith stories that need to be shared.

Faith testimonies don't need to be exceptionally dramatic. Mine isn't. I grew up being taken to church by my parents. As a teenager I found a place for myself helping as a deacon in the congregation. I'd take my turn as an usher who collected the offering. I'd help record the service, duplicate the cassette tapes and deliver them to shut-ins. When I was in high school, I told my parents I wanted to be a minister. It surprised them a bit, but they were generally supportive. I stored away that conviction while I studied music in college. Then one day, when I was about 20, I remember thinking about God—Creator, Savior, Holy Spirit. I realized that if Jesus truly rose from the dead, then all the categories of this world had now been changed by that one act of radical, miraculous love. As I thought about this, I didn't cry out like Isaiah, "Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips." But I did remember some of the lines from Psalm 8: *When I look at your heavens, the moon and the stars that you have established, who are we that you are mindful of us, mortals that you care for 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 clarity.

Out of the haze of their lives, Peter and Andrew were called to leave their fishing nets and become disciples of Christ. Out of the fog of dishonesty, Matthew was called away from his tax collector's booth to follow Jesus. Out of the shadows in the cemetery, Mary Magdalene was shaken from her grief and saw with clear eyes that Jesus was not among the dead, but the living; and that her crucified teacher was now the resurrected Savior.

Out of whatever confusion and befuddlement clouds you in your own life, trust that God chooses to come to you. God is always willing to take the initiative. When Isaiah saw his vision long ago, this initiative took the form of a glowing ember of coal—something that would cleanse and purify. It was a gift freely offered by grace so he might gain clarity—walk forward by faith—and understand, even dimly, the depth and height and wonder of God’s love. God comes near to us in our busted-up, mixed-up, confused states of daily being and touches us—our lips, our hearts, our reasoning, whatever—and makes out of us something new, something noble and changed for good.

In those moments our eyes are opened and our ears are unplugged. We see, hear and think differently with a clarity that wasn’t possible amid the smoke, fog and distractions of our prior life. In that moment, there usually comes a call—“Who will go for me?” As individuals hungry for a purpose in our life and a direction we should follow, like Isaiah of old, we find ourselves saying, “Hineni! I’m here. Send me.”

Now, do we need to hear these calls more than once? Honestly, probably yes. Dramatic conversion experiences like what happened to the apostle Paul are the exception, not the rule. We need reminders. We need to tell our stories more than once to hold onto the details, and we can update our stories as the clarity we gained has been confirmed by subsequent moments of grace, wisdom, and joy. Reminders are perfectly fine. ELPC has worship every Sunday. Come join us again next week. Or log on when we have prayer times on Tuesday and Thursday. Take part in a Sunday School class. Hey, some weeks we share communion—or celebrate baptisms—or re-tell the story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem or his final words spoken from the cross outside Jerusalem. Don’t worry if your memory isn’t as good as it used to be. We tell these stories over and over again, year after year. Because in them, we remember what is most important. We remember what we have clearly felt on occasion and what keeps us going all the other times in-between.

That’s enough for now. It is good to see all of you again—to sing with Michael and Robin—to pray with Heather, Patrice and Kathryn—to find in this crazy season of disrupted routines a moment of clarity through shared worship as a family of faith. I hope you feel the same. Whatever happens the rest of the day or the rest of the week, move forward by faith. Build upon the story of what you believe and know to be true. And always be ready to shout, “Hineni! Yes, Lord, I’m here. Send me.”

AMEN