

February 6, 2022 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Isaiah 6:1–9](#)

TITLE: **Smoke, Fire & Faith**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Smoke, fire, faith—that’s what this passage from Isaiah 6 is about. Smoke: a vision of the Lord God in the heavenly temple, surrounded by angelic seraphim and swirling clouds of incense and smoke. Fire: a prophet finds himself before God and is filled with unworthiness and fear until a glowing coal is taken from the fire to touch his lips and set him free from doubt and sin. Faith: The prophet is empowered to be a servant of God and volunteers to tell the Lord’s message to the people, even if they don’t hear or understand. Smoke, fire, faith.

Look up for a moment. There’s a reason why our church has high ceilings. There is a reason cathedrals have soaring ceilings held aloft by rising columns and whose walls are punctuated with brightly-colored stained glass windows pulling your eyes upward. In the Sagrada Familia cathedral in Barcelona, the tops of the pillars even have branches as if you are looking at tall trees and seeing beyond them into heaven itself. It is all meant to fill us with awe—to remind us that God is God, and we are not God.

Awe does not come easily to us human beings. We are no longer easily impressed. We are cynical, self-centered; we prefer to imagine the world as revolving around us rather than as a place that far exceeds us. But sometimes things remind us that we are small and the universe is massive: A space telescope reminds us of the billions of other planets out there in the night sky. A Grand Canyon or a Himalayan mountain range put our puny statures to shame.

Isaiah’s experience of awe came in a vision in which he found himself before the throne of God—a place modeled after what he’d seen in the Jerusalem temple; a place of high ceilings and carved angels and altars aflame with burnt offerings and incense so that the entire room was filled with the haze of smoke. Somehow that space had no upper limit, because from Isaiah’s perspective all he could see was the hem of God’s robe and it filled the entire temple. When is the last time you felt awe? Write down that word [on your bulletin or] on a scrap of paper and think about this later today. So much today is human-sized and anthropocentric. So much is about us that we forget that life really isn’t about us. It is much bigger, more God-sized than me-sized. One way to hold onto that truth is to remember what made you feel awe and to give thanks that holy, holy, holy is our God.

In the smoke-filled temple, Isaiah was overwhelmed. He felt unworthy and he felt scared. He felt this personally, saying “Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips.” And he felt it communally: “I live among a people of unclean lips.” I know I’m like Isaiah: I say what I shouldn’t say. I make mistakes. Often when I think I’m doing the right thing, I make things worse. And believe me, I’m not alone in this. We are meant to be people of peace, yet we are surrounded by weapons of war, missiles fired from drones, tanks now amassing at nations’ borders. We are meant to be people of justice, yet we arrest and

tase and lock up huge swaths of our neighbors of color unjustly. Not only is the space between us and God immense, but there is no way for us to cross that expanse on our own merit—either alone or as a people.

All of that is true—and well-known to God, who is both holy and merciful. So what happens next? God acts on our behalf. God finds a way to bridge the divide between holiness and sinfulness. In this passage, this is symbolized by a bit of fiery coal. A glowing ember that touches us and takes away all impurity. We have here something sacramental. In the language of St. Augustine and John Calvin, we have a visible sign of an invisible reality. A visible sign like the water of baptism that splashes over us and washes us clean. A visible sign like a meal of bread and wine—a coming together in a communion that feeds our souls. When we feel unworthy, lost, broken and afraid, God comes to us to make things right.

Before I move on from this idea, I was deeply struck by an essay written by Amanda Gorman—the brilliant young poet who spoke at President Biden’s inauguration. She admitted that she almost didn’t go through with speaking at that event. She was terrified for several reasons. As she put it, “I was terrified of failing my people. Covid was still raging and my age group couldn’t get vaccinated yet. A few weeks before, domestic terrorists assaulted the U.S. Capitol, the very steps where I would recite. I knew I’d become highly visible, which is a very dangerous thing to be in America, especially if you’re Black and outspoken and have no Secret Service.” Friends warned her that she might be killed and that it all just wasn’t worth it. Then she came to this powerful realization. She wrote: “Maybe being brave enough doesn’t mean lessening my fear, but listening to it...Fear can be love trying its best in the dark.”¹ Gorman ended by exhorting us not to fear our fear, but own it. Set it free.

Something in the prophet Isaiah was set free that day. He stood in awe amid the smoke. His unworthiness and fear were resolved by being touched by a coal of fire, an act of divine mercy. This led him to a place of faith. Isaiah broke the silence and said, “Here I am, Lord. Send me.” It’s a powerful statement. Our closing hymn is built around these words— “Here I am, Lord. I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.” This sentiment has moved women and men to pursue vocations in ministry and go to seminary—or become mission co-workers in rural communities here or in lands far overseas. Maybe you’ve felt such stirrings and considered such vocations. Or maybe an aspect of it has moved you to share the good news of Christ by inviting friends to worship—to let them know you’re praying for them. Or maybe it is there when you sincerely want to make a difference by being the best possible teacher or nurse or lawyer or counselor, the one doing your job honestly and with integrity, the one who volunteers without worrying about recognition or pay. I’d wager that Isaiah’s words have been on each of your lips at some point— “Here I am, Lord; send me.”

Having said all that, saying “Here I am, Lord” and stepping out by faith is no guarantee that the work ahead of you will be easy or immediately accepted. We embody our faith in a world that routinely says “No” to God and God’s ways. We live out our faith in a

place of both beauty and blight, of wonder and woe. In fact, the very words Isaiah was given to speak named the fact that the soil in which these seeds of faith were to be planted was rocky and unyielding—for some will listen but just not get it; some will look for answers but simply not understand.

Remember smoke—fire—faith. We encounter God and God’s truth; it overwhelms us like a lofty, smoke-filled cathedral. It fills us with awe and a sense of unworthiness. But God doesn’t leave us in that state. God reaches out to us—comes to us in a fiery coal, a sacramental meal, a Son who is our Savior. In that moment we are healed, redeemed and sent forth to lead lives of faith. The success of our faith-work is reliant upon us but not dependent on us. It uses us, but it goes way beyond us. We do works now, but we will likely not see the results in this moment—or perhaps even in our lifetime. But we still do the work. We tell the story. We plant the seeds. We open the doors to welcome in everyone. We go out into the streets to act justly for everyone. We walk by faith, not sight, as the good book says.

Kwame Appiah teaches at NYU and tells about flying on airplanes when his seatmates ask what he does for a living. When he tells them he’s a philosopher, they will often ask him, “So what’s your philosophy of life?” To which he replies, “Everything is more complicated than you thought.”² I’d love to tell you that saying “Here I am” to God means that your path forward will be clear and sunny and prosperous. Some preachers who drive much nicer cars than me have made their careers saying precisely that. But that wasn’t true for Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel. It wasn’t true for Dorothy Day, Rosa Parks or Fannie Lou Hamer. We will speak and not be heard; we will explain and not be understood. Sometimes the fault is in our message. Sometimes it’s just not the right moment. Sometimes we are only scattering seed that may take years to take root. But such is our calling.

So remember what fills you with awe—and trust that something far greater than you is at work in you and in this world for good, for healing and hope. If you are filled with fear, hold on to what Amanda Gorman said—that fear is sometimes love trying to find its way in the dark. Be willing to stand up and speak up. Say “Here I am.” Say to a doubting world, here is something in which to believe. Say it by words and deeds wherever God has placed you. Then like Isaiah, you’ll move through smoke, be touched by fire, and yes, you’ll walk by faith.

AMEN

¹ Amanda Gorman, “If You’re Alive, You’re Afraid,” *New York Times*, January 23, 2022, SR 5.

² Kwame Anthony Appiah, *New York Times Book Review*, February 3, 2008, p. 22.