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Isaiah 6:1-8

“History is unavoidable...” Those are the words of theologian Gene M. Tucker.

Today’s reading takes place in a country that is on the cusp of major change.

King Uzziah has been leading the people for 52 years. He is the 10th King of Judah and under his care, the nation has experienced the most prosperous of times.

But- in about 30 years things are going to change.

Assyria, the nation to the North, is gaining in power and might and is becoming a threat, one that will alter the course of Israel forever.

“History is unavoidable” is what theologian Gene Tucker says, and we hear that right in the start of today’s reading.

The King has died and the prophet Isaiah is in the sanctuary.

We are not told why he is there, but Isaiah is standing before the most holy of places- where the Ark of the Covenant is located and the 10 Commandments kept.

Who knows why Isaiah is there at this moment?

Perhaps he was supposed to be there, doing some kind of task for the Temple.

Perhaps he was there for prayer, a chance to engage one on one with God.

Perhaps, like many of us from last week, he was there in the sanctuary because he was trying to process the news about their leader and the Temple is the place he wanted to be.

Perhaps the sanctuary is where he needed to be.

The author does not tell us or give us any real tangible hint.

But since the author tells us immediately about the King’s death, it can lead us to wonder what was Isaiah’s mood that day.

Was he melancholy, wondering if they will ever have such a time again in their nation’s history?

Was he eager? Maybe looking forward to what life could possibly be like with a new king coming in?

Was he there with his stomach in knots, attuned to what was going on with the nation north of them, thinking that perhaps this change in power had made the people that much more vulnerable?

What brought Isaiah into that sanctuary that day and what was he feeling?

In the words of the King of Nineveh- “Who knows?”

But what we are told is that into this moment of history, Isaiah has an image of God, and it is powerful, one of the most powerful encounters in all of scripture.

As Isaiah tells us, he sees the Lord sitting on a throne, which most likely means that God is sitting on the Ark of the Covenant, which would have also been the most elevated, most holy place in all the building.

Isaiah says he saw seraphs, with covered faces, and they flew.

As they flew they called to one another “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts.”

This words “Holy” is to remind us that God is like no other and there is no other like God.

The sanctuary is reverberating with this song “Holy Holy Holy...the whole earth is full of God’s glory.”

It is a testimony to how the world and all of creation is God’s.

Isaiah’s encounter with the Lord is personal, so unique. There’s smoke, there’s song.

And what is Isaiah’s first response?

Woe and fear.

Verse 5 has the prophet say “I am lost”, but a better translation may be “I fear for my life.”

Isaiah is in the Temple, an eyewitness to God’s glory, and his response is fear and woe.

And why does he feel this way?

Because he simply thinks he is not good enough.

At this moment, as all this wonder is taking place, all Isaiah can think about is all that he has done wrong, all the tragic mistakes he has made, how imperfect he is, and how broken his people are.

“Holy Holy Holy...the whole earth is full of God’s glory” sings the seraphs.

And all Isaiah can think of to say is “Woe is me. I am lost. I am a person of unclean lips, and I live among imperfect, unclean people.”

Is there anyone who can identify with Isaiah today?

The feeling of being full of sin?

That feeling of guilt from what you have done?

That feeling of not being good enough?

That’s what’s going on in today’s story. Even within the sanctuary, even with the glory of God before him, even with all this song and splendor...

...Isaiah can only focus on how he thinks he does not measure up; he assumes he is unworthy to see and hear and experience God.

And yet, and yet he is the one that God has called; he is the one that God chooses.

In a symbolic act with a piece of coal, his mouth is touched, and he is told “your guilt is wiped away; your sins are no more.”

In the words of Psalm 32:5, he is basically being told that the guilt of his sins are forgiven.

In essence, he is being told that his mistakes, his errors are no more...so now he is free.

He is free from the slavery of his sin.

He is free from what he thinks he’s done wrong.

He is free from his sense of inadequacy, and he is now made ready to “do” and to “act.”

Amid all the wonder and splendor of the sanctuary, Isaiah thought he was incapable.

But God dismantles those thoughts, places upon Isaiah a change of heart.

And now, when God asks the question- “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”,

Isaiah finds a way to speak, he finds the words to say “Here am I; send me.”

Isaiah finds a way to act, to be brave and to answer the call. In doing so, nearly 2,800 years later we are still reading his words and we are still telling his story.

Isaiah becomes a good reminder to all of us that the Lord does not see us as we see ourselves.

The Lord does not see us limited by our mistakes or the sins we have done or the guilt that we carry.

God is Holy and holy other. God does not see us as the world sees us. God is not confined to or limited by how we see ourselves.

God can see who we are and what we are each capable of.

God is free to surprise us, empower us, and call us, even when history or life or circumstances seem to get in the way.

For that, let us say "Amen."