

It is fitting that we begin Isaiah 6-12 on the first Sunday of Advent.

This is the section of Isaiah that promises the coming of Immanuel.

Isaiah 6-12 is the second major section of Isaiah.

It begins and ends with the Holy One of Israel.

It begins with the image of a stump,
it ends with a branch growing out of that stump.

The focus is on the beginning of Isaiah's ministry,
during the reign of Ahaz,
when Syria and Ephraim (Damascus and Samaria) were the primary threats.

The introduction in chapters 1-5 has set the stage.

Judah stands convicted of idolatry and oppression.

They have not sought the Lord,
but instead they have sought their own pleasure and their own selfish gain.

When God looked for justice, he found bloodshed;

When God looked for righteousness, he heard an outcry against the bribery and deceit
of those who despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

But the LORD of hosts is exalted in justice,
and the Holy One shows himself holy in righteousness.

He will judge his people,
bringing the nations against them to destroy Judah and Jerusalem.

This is the message that Isaiah is commissioned to bring.

He has a task worse than Jonah's.

Jonah was commanded to go to Ninevah – the Assyrian capital –
a generation earlier,
and preach the judgment of God.

He didn't want to go, because he knew that God might relent and have mercy.

But Isaiah is told to preach the judgment of God to Jerusalem,
with the promise that God is not going to relent.

Indeed, he is called to close their eyes.

But Isaiah's eyes are wide open – and he cannot forget what he saw!

1. What Isaiah Sees: The Vision of the LORD of Hosts (v1-7)

a. The Death of King Uzziah (v1)

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up;
and the train of his robe filled the temple."*

Uzziah (or Azariah) reigned in Jerusalem for 52 years.
His father, Amaziah, had been a decent king,
but he was proud, and he had challenged Jehoash of Israel to battle.
And Jehoash had defeated Judah in battle, captured Amaziah,
and torn down part of the wall of Jerusalem,
ransacking the temple treasuries.

It appears that Amaziah spent 10 years in captivity in Israel.
And it may have been at this time that Azariah (also called Uzziah) was crowned king,
because it appears that he had a 25-year coregency with his father.

Amaziah was restored to Jerusalem after the death of Jehoash of Israel,
but 15 years later he was assassinated,
and Uzziah was placed on his throne (2 K 14)

For 52 years Uzziah reigned, but around ten years before his death, he grew proud
and sought to burn incense before the Lord –
something only the priests were to do.
When Uzziah refused to listen to the warnings of the priests,
God struck him with leprosy,
and he was "excluded from the house of the Lord" (2 Chron 26)
His son Jotham, for all practical intents and purposes took his place as king.

So the "year that King Uzziah died" found Isaiah in the temple,
the place where the king could not go due to his uncleanness.
This year (ca. 740 B.C.) finds Judah in trouble.

The Assyrians have revived their plans for westward expansion.
Tiglath Pileser III is poised to strike Palestine and bring it under his dominion.

Uzziah is symbolic of the nation as a whole.
He dies alone – unclean – excluded from the house of the Lord.
As Uzziah goes, so goes the nation.

But in the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah sees the Lord (Adonai)
He doesn't say Yahweh, but Adonai.
The Mighty One.
He doesn't say what Adonai looks like, for all he sees is the throne
and the train, or hem, of his robe.

But that is enough to fill the whole temple.

b. The Universal Glory of the LORD of Hosts (v2-3)

² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"^[b]

And there above him stood the seraphim,
each with six wings:
two to cover his face, two to cover his feet, and two to fly.
Even the seraphim cannot look directly at the glory of God.
But they call to each other,
"Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

The word *holy* means to be "set apart" – and in a distinctly religious sense.

When you think of God's holiness,
it is easy to think of his "other-ness" –
he is holy – we are not!

And it's okay to think that!
That's where Isaiah goes too!
But the proclamation of God's thrice-holiness –
Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of Hosts – the whole earth is full of his glory!"

this is not the proclamation of the far-distant one
who is too far away to care about anyone or anything...

This is the proclamation of the utterly transcendent one –
whose holiness impels him to draw near to his rebellious creatures!

The only problem is that if he draws near he will destroy them –
or, more precisely, they will be destroyed by the radiance of his presence.

I like the way that John Webster puts it:

"Holiness, because it is the holiness of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
now present in the Spirit's power,
is pure majesty in relation.
God's holy majesty, even in its unapproachableness,
is not characterized by a sanctity which is abstract difference or otherness,
a counter-reality to the profane;

it is majesty known in turning,
enacted and manifest in the works of God.
Majesty and relation are not opposed moments in God's holiness;
they are simply different articulations of the selfsame reality"
(John Webster, Holiness, 42)

The whole of Isaiah 6 is a revelation of the holiness of God –
a holiness that reveals that God is *indeed* high and holy –
but also that he is holy *and near*.
Indeed, his holiness impels him to draw near.

His holiness will impel him to *do something* about humanity's problem!

But first we see the greatness of the Holy One:

c. The Unclean Lips of Prophet and People (v4-5)

⁴ *And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.* ⁵ *And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"*

Predictably, when Yahweh shows up, things get shook up.

"And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called,
and the house was filled with smoke."

There are echoes here of Mt. Sinai – when the LORD showed up there in the Exodus.
The glory of the LORD can be terrifying!

Remember at the end of chapter 5, we saw the anger of the LORD revealed in judgment –
the roaring of the lions – the growling of the sea –
“and if one looks to the land, behold, darkness and distress;
and the light is darkened by its clouds.” (Is 5:30)

The darkness of 5:30 has now fallen on Isaiah himself.

As Uzziah has fallen into the darkness of death,
as Judah and Jerusalem are falling into darkness –
so now Isaiah sees himself in the light of the glory of the Lord,
and seeing and smelling the smoke,
and feeling the ground shake beneath his feet,
he cries out, "Woe is me!
For I am lost;
for I am a man of unclean lips,

and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;
for my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts!"
The king is dead,
and Isaiah now sees the true King, but it is not a comforting sight.

Isaiah 6 revolves around two things:
first what Isaiah sees (1-7)
and then what Isaiah hears (8-13).
In both cases Isaiah responds with "and I said." (5, 8, 11)

His first response is to what he sees.
When he sees the holiness of God,
Isaiah responds by placing himself and his people with the unclean King Uzziah.
Isaiah demonstrates that OT Israel understood exactly the point of ceremonial purity.
It is not what goes into a man's mouth that makes him unclean,
but what comes out! (Matthew 15)
Isaiah recognizes that he has unclean lips.

How are your lips doing?
A little chapped, perhaps? –
dried out by the hot, foul breath that comes from within?

Your lips are unclean.

With the same mouth you praise God,
and curse your brother, your children, or your neighbors--
those who are made in the image of God.
Beloved, this should not be!

Can the same fountain produce both salt water and fresh?
Yes, with our technology we could probably build a fountain
that produced both salt water and fresh.
But it would only be a lie—a deception to cheat us.
Because behind the outward appearance,
there would be two sources—two pipes.
No, the *same fountain* – the *same source* – cannot produce both salt water and fresh!

d. The Burning Coal that Cleanses (v6-7)

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

Isaiah's lips are unclean.

What can be done for one whose lips are unclean?
They must be cleansed.

And so one of the seraphim flew to him, with a burning coal from the altar,
"and he touched my mouth and said,
"Behold, this has touched your lips;
your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

The holy fire of the altar, which had consumed the burnt offerings,
the most holy part of the grain offerings,
and the fat of the peace offerings,
now touches Isaiah's lips.

The fire, whose smoke had ascended to heaven as a pleasing aroma before the Lord,
now burns away Isaiah's sin.

This is a striking image.
Until now, the image of fire and of burning has been an image of destruction and death.

But Isaiah is shown that the *fire of the altar* is a purifying fire.
Isaiah is cleansed through fire.
If Isaiah had only made reference to his own lips,
then we would merely watch this.
But Isaiah connects his lips to those of his people.
I am a man of unclean lips,
and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.

And so what Isaiah receives is but a foretaste of what God's people will receive.

There will come a day when the people of God will be cleansed by the fire of the altar.

But for the moment, it provides a stark contrast between Isaiah and his people.
Isaiah is now holy and his lips are now purified,
but the people have not yet received the purification by fire.

2. What Isaiah Hears: Isaiah's Commission (v8-13)

We hear why in verses 8-10.

In verses 1-7 he heard of what Isaiah saw.
Now in verses 8-13 we hear of what Isaiah heard.
Isaiah heard the voice of Adonai.
And the Lord (Adonai) declares:

a. Preach a Message that Blinds (v8-10)

⁸ *And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"*

Who will go?

Who will proclaim the message of the Kingdom of God?

Who will speak for the Holy God and declare the coming of his kingdom?!

Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."

Isaiah's first response – like so many others – was to realize his unworthiness before God.

We've lived so long with an "I'm okay – you're okay" attitude in our culture,
that we need to hear of our *unworthiness* –
that we are *not okay*.

But we also need to hear Isaiah's second response!

What has changed in the thirty seconds since his first response?!!

In one sense – nothing has changed –

Isaiah is still the same person he was thirty seconds ago!

And yet – everything has changed!

God has cleansed his unclean lips –
making him *worthy*.

Your guilt is taken away – your sin is atoned for.

As Psalm 32 says,

"Blessed is the one whose trespass is forgiven,
whose sin is covered;

Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impart iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no guile."

The one who is forgiven now boldly stands before the Lord ready to serve.

When God draws near, he comes as the Holy One –

he doesn't set aside his holiness in order to draw near.

Rather, his holiness cleanses the unclean – by faith.

But having been cleansed – having been forgiven –

we now are fully able to do that which the Lord calls us to do!

The reason *why* God revealed himself to Isaiah was not to destroy him,
but to commission him!

Isaiah is called to bring a particular message to God's people:

⁹ And he said, “Go, and say to this people:
“Keep on hearing,^[c] but do not understand;
keep on seeing,^[d] but do not perceive.’
¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull (literally, “fat”),
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”

They have fat hearts – and a fat heart is a dull heart – a slow heart –
like their heavy ears and blinded eyes –

Isaiah's call is to harden the hearts of Judah and Jerusalem.
He is called to preach to them
so that they will be without excuse in the day of judgment.

Assyria is coming,
and behind them,
Babylon.

Isaiah must prepare Judah and Jerusalem for the Day of the LORD.

So you wanna be a prophet!?
The prophet is not a “fortune teller” –
the prophet does not even necessarily “predict” future events.
The prophet declares the Word of the LORD –
and the coming of his Kingdom – the coming Day of the LORD.

b. Until the Exile (v11-13b)

Then I said, “How long, O Lord?”

Hearing of this dread mission, Isaiah speaks a third time.
The first time he spoke, he confessed his sin.
The second time he spoke, he volunteered to serve the Lord.
Now the third time, Isaiah asks a question:
How long, O Lord?

This was a familiar cry of the Psalms.
Psalm 6:3-But you, O Lord, how long? Turn, O Lord, save my life!
Psalm 13:1-How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?

Psalm 74:10-how long, O God, is the foe to scoff?
Psalm 79:5-how long, O Lord, will you be angry forever?
Psalm 80:4-how long will you be angry with your peoples' prayers?
Psalm 89:46-how long, O Lord, will you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire?
Psalm 90:13-Return, O Lord, how long?
Psalm 94:13-O Lord, how long shall the wicked exult?

The Psalms frequently asked God how long,
but they never got so specific an answer as Isaiah gets.

And he said:

*“Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is a desolate waste,
¹²and the LORD removes people far away,
and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.
¹³And though a tenth remain in it,
it will be burned^[1] again,
like a terebinth or an oak,
whose stump remains
when it is felled.”*

The two basic divisions of Isaiah are prefigured in this commission.

Isaiah must prophesy of the coming wrath-
the exile is at hand;
and yet there is also hope in the end.
God will leave a remnant.

Isaiah 1-37 will set forth the coming judgment in the context of the Assyrian threat.
Isaiah 38-66 will set forth the hope of restoration after the Babylonian exile.

Isaiah's commission was to blind the eyes of his people for the day of judgment.

And John tells us that this was Jesus' purpose as well.

In John 12:39-40 John says that all of Jesus' signs had the same purpose.

He had to blind the Pharisees and leaders of the Jews:

Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said:

He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart,
Lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart,
And turn, and I would heal them.

Jesus opened the eyes of the blind,
but he also came to make seeing eyes blind.

Likewise Matthew tells us that Isaiah's commission was the purpose of Jesus' parables.
Only those whom the Father called would hear the voice of the Good Shepherd.
Only the elect would believe on the name of the Lord Jesus.

But John goes a step further.
He comments on Isaiah 6, saying:
Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.

Isaiah beheld the glory of Christ.
Isaiah's commission is the commission of the Messiah.

Because the coming judgment is the judgment that only the Messiah can bear.
Messiah must be struck down and removed from the land.
He must be made a desolate waste –
tohu vbohu –
barren and desolate.

Like a burned up old stump.
The holy seed is its stump.

But that is not the end of Isaiah's commission.
The call to blind the eyes of the Jews has one more reference.
Acts 28
Paul meets with the Jews in Rome, "trying to convince them about Jesus
both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets,
and some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.
And disagreeing among themselves,
they departed after Paul had made one statement:
'The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet:
"Go to this people, and say,
You will indeed hear but never understand,
and will indeed see but never perceive.
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed;
lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart and turn,
and I would heal them.'" (Acts 28:24-27)

Paul points out that Isaiah's commission is also the commission of every preacher!
It is not enough for the preacher to give the "good parts version" of the gospel.
The preacher also needs to warn his hearers against hardening their hearts!

In every generation the temptation will come to think that "we're the good guys" –

and so we forget to love God and neighbor...

This is why there is one final phrase in verse 13!

c. The Holy Seed (v13c)

“The holy seed is its stump.”

This burned-out stump sitting in the midst of the land.

After the fire of God’s wrath comes blazing through Jerusalem,
there will be a stump – a remnant.

But just as the burning coal did not destroy Isaiah's lips,
but cleansed them for speaking in the service of the Lord;
so also the burning of the land will not destroy God's people,
but will sanctify them.

God’s holiness impels him to draw a people to himself!

And as Isaiah will show us later,
there will be a branch that grows from this stump,
even our Lord Jesus Christ,
which will bear fruit unto eternal life.

Notice that this is the *holy seed*.

The theme of the *seed* will return in Isaiah 41.

There’s not much about the “seed” in the first half of Isaiah (besides this verse).

But the idea of the “seed” plays a significant role
in eleven different chapters in the second half of Isaiah.

In the first half of Isaiah, it gets about the same airtime as hope does in chapter 6!

One line.

The holy seed is its stump.

Do you remember what we saw last week?

The vineyard that produced stink fruit?

The problem is that a people of unclean lips cannot enter the presence of a holy God.

And no matter how much God does –

Redeem his people from slavery in Egypt –

give them his *law* –

establish worship –

build a kingdom –

send prophets –

it's not enough to *change the hearts of humanity*.

Humanity keeps producing stink fruit.

But God is holy – no, God is *Holy, Holy, Holy!*

And this thrice-holy God loves his people and wants them to be with him.

But a bad tree won't produce good fruit.

No matter how you tend a stink fruit vine, it won't produce good grapes.

How can you purify an unclean vine?

You do know what the next chapter says... right?

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

Let us pray.

Almighty God, grant that we who have been grafted in to the true vine, your only Son, our Savior, might show forth our thankfulness for this great gift, by loving you with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength. By your grace and mercy, grant that we might bear rich fruit in your service. Grant that we might see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and understand with our hearts, and turn to you day by day, so that we might live before you all our days.