

## **The Power of “Yes”**

Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

Psalm 138

We all know the trope about history repeating itself. I’m not sure that knowing history is a simple antidote to history’s repetition, but I do think there is a lot to be said for remembering that we are part of a much larger story, and our experiences are nothing new. Perhaps the most helpful part of learning history is finding ourselves in the stories from the past so we can apply the lessons to our current moment.

To that end, I’d like to take a moment for a history lesson this morning. Our reading from Isaiah starts by saying, “in the year of king Uzziah’s death”. If you don’t know who Uzziah was or why Isaiah mentions his death, his prophetic vision loses much of its impact. So, let’s start by looking back.

Imagine, if you will, the Promised Land. The Mediterranean Sea is to the west, The Sea of Galilee connects the Jordan river down to the Dead Sea, Egypt is far to the south, and Jerusalem is right in the middle. This whole area was promised to God’s people, and they had worked hard, after their slavery in Egypt to secure it from their enemies. Eventually they built a temple in Jerusalem and reformed their religious practices. Those in Jerusalem and the surrounding locations codified their temple worship procedures and tightened down the practice of their religion, believing that perfect obedience to God through correct worship would win them God’s favor and protection. But there were whole communities of people living too far from Jerusalem to make worship in the temple practical. God’s people in the North experienced alienation from those in the South, who believed Northerners failed to uphold God’s commands sufficiently. The northerners disliked being looked down on, so they stopped allowing their Southern relatives to set the

bar for their religious practice. The Northerners confused the pain they felt in response to their kinsmen with their response to God, and the anger they felt towards their brethren turned into alienation from God. As a response, during Uzziah's reign, the Northern kingdom turned from God to idolatry. And the Southern kingdom feared the risk of that insidious, corrupting influence.

Uzziah was king of the Southern Kingdom, called Judah. He was a wise king who obeyed God and led his people into incredible prosperity. He was one of the longest reigning kings of Judah and the people loved him. But near the end of his reign, his pride got the better of him. His arrogance became a cautionary tale when God struck him with leprosy.

When Isaiah has this prophetic vision, he was praying in the temple. His heart was broken over the loss of the king who had done so much for his nation before falling into sin. Isaiah had observed the growing corruption of his Northern brethren, feared their idolatrous practices, and wondered what would become of God's people altogether. It wasn't long after Uzziah's death that Assyria would conquer the Northern Kingdom, and this was a terrifying moment for Isaiah, watching the world changing around him. Grief, loss, loneliness, and the fear of an uncertain future. He must have felt small and powerless in the face of so many things beyond his control. Have you ever felt that way?

It was in **that** moment that God appeared. Our text says the hem of God's robe filled the temple. The hem. The smallest, lowest part of the garment was so enormous that it filled the entire space of the building. The Lord was enthroned above him, ostensibly beyond the ceiling, and the angels covered God from view. This scene is awe inspiring. The colossal image described is meant to help us feel the way Isaiah instantly felt. Transported. In one moment, he went from being consumed by the threats of his future to the instant and complete fear of God.

When we become terribly afraid, or hopeless, sometimes it's helpful to remember the God who exists right here, beyond the veil of human sight. It certainly seemed to help Isaiah. Instantly, at God's request, Isaiah transforms from feeling helpless and hopeless into the boldness of partnership in God's service.

What a beautiful story! The lectionary offers us the opportunity to end the reading at Isaiah's proclamation, "here I am, send me". But the power of the story lies in the message God gives Isaiah to prophecy. It's a hard message, but it is not without hope.

Isaiah's people thought they were righteous because they upheld the Law. But they had failed the heart of the Law. They looked to their own righteousness and felt superior over their Northern siblings, and, in God's economy, that was just as evil as the Northerners who had left God when they felt wounded by the Southerners' superior attitudes. Isaiah's prophecy was destruction over the entirety of the Promised Land. God wants relationship with people. It's what God has always sought. But, the warmth of God's love can't be felt by hearts turned cold from pride in their own self-righteousness. And God can't be heard by people who have closed their ears to God's voice. The very last line of this prophecy says that "the holy seed is its stump". Remember when we talked about the olive trees whose deep roots make it possible for them to spring back to life even after they appear dead? God would preserve the Good News he promised to their father, Abraham, and salvation would come again, but only after the hope of human rescue failed and the people turned back to God.

Christians are resurrection people. God is a resurrection God. Every time we come to the end of our abilities; we can be confident that God is ready to act.

Many years later, an itinerant teacher used a boat as a stage from which to teach. A group of weary fishermen who had worked hard all night without catching a single fish, felt the despondency of futile work. Worn out bodies from physical labor, worn out spirits from suffering under the oppression of powerful and cruel political leaders, the loss of dignity and hope. It was in that moment that God appeared. Only this time it was boats, not a temple, that were filled to overflowing with fish, instead of a robe. It was every bit as awe inspiring. And once again, God commissioned humans to participate in the work of hope. Isaiah said, “send me”. To the first disciples, Jesus said, “follow me”. Jesus was not far off, he was near, and he would be with them and his spirit would remain with them.

God has been offering humans the outstretched hand of a relationship since the very beginning of the story. We humans find so many excuses to turn away from God, and then we turn against one another. History tells that same story a myriad ways. It is not new. And every time we turn against God and one another, there is an opportunity to come back. Back into fellowship with God and back into union with one another. Sometimes it looks very bleak before the light of God’s love reappears. But ever since Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit, we now carry within us the light of the good news that heals and restores. We carry within us the holy seed and it is within our hands to tend it.

Isaiah said, “here I am, send me”. Simon, and the first disciples, dropped their nets, left their boats, and followed Jesus. Paul, the least of the disciples, on encountering the risen Christ on the Road to Damascus, responded “what do you want me to do”?

We all know what it is to feel hopeless, powerless in the face of forces beyond our control, overwhelmed, grieved, angry, and lonely. But we are Christians. We are resurrection people. Our scriptures are full of the stories of God inviting humans into God’s work, the work of healing, restoration, and love. Whenever we encounter dead looking stumps, we can be sure that resurrection is close. I do not know what invitation God may be stirring

within hearts today. But I hope when we identify it, that we have the courage to say, “here am I, send me”. May we be a people filled with such confidence in the power and love of God’s good news, that we are ready to drop our nets and follow when we hear our Lord’s call.