

The King of Zion and the Epicenter of God's Salvation

The Book of Isaiah

God Commissions the Prophet

Isaiah 6:1 – 13

Introduction: An Impossible Mission



This past Christmas Eve, my family and I went to go see the movie *The Hobbit*. We had really been looking forward to it, since I read the book to my kids on a family vacation four years ago and really liked it. This scene is the scene where Bilbo Baggins is being asked by Gandalf the Grey and the thirteen dwarves to join their mission impossible: To march to the Lonely Mountain, defeat the dragon Smaug the Golden, and reclaim the lost dwarf kingdom that he took over years ago. And how could they possibly win? How can thirteen dwarves defeat a dragon when an entire kingdom of dwarves plus an entire town of men weren't enough to stop him before? An elven kingdom had even decided to not to get involved. And so here is Bilbo reading the contract. But off to the side, Thorin Oakenshield says to Gandalf, 'I cannot guarantee his safety.' Gandalf says, 'Understood.' Then Thorin says, 'Nor will I be responsible for his fate.' That is how big the danger is. It is truly a mission impossible.

Relevance

It can feel like that for us following Jesus on his mission. It can feel impossible. Whether we think about a family member who is just stubbornly against following Jesus, too, or people at our work, or people in this neighborhood, we might feel like this is just a hard, impossible task.

Context

We are in the Book of Isaiah. The last time, we looked at Isaiah 2:1 – 4, where Isaiah's vision is of the world streaming to Jerusalem, in a sense, to learn about the one true God. And the teaching of the king would be spread over the whole world, so that people would beat swords into plowshares.

Verse 1 of Isaiah 6 begins, 'In the year of Uzziah's death.' That is important to understand emotionally what the people of God were feeling. Uzziah had been a great but then tragic king. Uzziah became king of the southern kingdom, Judah, at the age of 16, and reigned for 52 long years (792 – 740 BC). After a string of bad kings with poor judgment, Uzziah was the greatest king since King Solomon. Unlike the wicked kings of the northern kingdom, Israel, Uzziah, according to 2 Chronicles 26:4 – 5, 'did right in the sight of the Lord according to all that his father Amaziah had done. And he continued to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding through the vision of God; as long as he sought the Lord, God prospered him.'

Uzziah's kingdom prospered in two ways: militarily and economically. Militarily, Uzziah built an elite army with the latest in warfare technology including effective siege engines. They were strong and very fast. Chronicles tells us, 'Moreover, Uzziah prepared for all the army shields, spears, helmets, body armor, bows and sling stones. And in Jerusalem he made engines of war invented by skillful men to be on the towers and on the corners, for the purpose of shooting arrows and great stones' (2 Chr.26:14 – 15). As if that weren't enough, whenever Uzziah fought, Scripture says, 'God helped him.' To the west, he conquered the Philistine cities, broke down their chief defenses and built up his own cities in the conquered areas. To the east, he conquered Ammon; they paid him tribute. To the south, he conquered the Edomites. His greatest achievement, though, was rebuilding the city of Elath. And with military expansion came economic prosperity. In the Negev, he built forts to secure the water supply. He brought Arabian trade by the sea coast, secured the mineral wealth of the Rift Valley, and developed agriculture in the Judean hills. Jerusalem was heavily fortified and enjoyed a great period of peace. The author of Chronicles says of King Uzziah, 'Hence his fame spread afar, for he was marvelously helped...until he was strong' (2 Chr.26:15).

King Louis XIV of France once said, 'L'etat, ce moi.' 'The state – it is I.' With similar pride, Uzziah overstepped the boundaries of his office: 'But when he became strong, his heart was so lifted up that he acted corruptly, and he was unfaithful to the Lord his God, for he entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense' (2 Chr 26:16). Only the priests were allowed to do that. But Uzziah thought he could enter into the presence of God and take God's holy fire unto himself. He was confronted by the high priest, Azariah, and eighty others for stepping out of line and dishonoring the Lord. But here is what happened next: 'Uzziah, with a censer in his hand for burning incense, was enraged; and while he was enraged with the priests, the leprosy broke out on his forehead...And King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death; and he lived in a separate house, being a leper, for he was cut off from the house of the Lord' (2 Chr.26:19-21). He became unclean and had to live in solitary confinement, dependent on the priests for food, help, and company. Leprosy was the only legacy left by the great King Uzziah. He had dared to presume on God. His son Jotham came to the throne, and then Jotham's wicked son Ahaz followed. It was the end of an age. Gone was the era of prosperity and peace. A time of war and ruin followed. The northern kingdom Israel went to war with Syria, and drew the attention of Assyria. The deadly Assyrian Empire attacked the northern kingdom of Israel and almost attacked the southern kingdom of Judah.

There we have the context of the vision of Isaiah. When our dreams start to fall apart, when human hope starts to fade, and you know that the best days are behind you, that is when we get a vision of heaven. 'In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne!' says Isaiah. In the midst of despair we are especially ripe for a revelation from God. He is still on His throne, and He is still establishing His reign on earth! So let's peer into the vision that Isaiah had.

The Encounter: v.1 – 5

^{6:1} In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. ² Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.' ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. ⁵ Then I said, 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.'

The vision is of God in the temple, absolutely filling the place. And when Uzziah left his human throne vacant, God was still on His throne. Even though the things of earth go wrong, things around God in the heavens are not. God reigns above all. God rules over all. And there are times when God intrudes into human affairs to set things right. That's what's going on here.

Illus: Now I'm not usually awed by much. But I want to help us think about what it's like to be in God's presence along two lines – one in terms of awe, the other in terms of unworthiness. On September 2, 2006, a good friend of

mine got married on the Canadian side of the Niagara Falls area. My wife and I brought our two kids out from Boston and decided to make a little family trip out of it. The wedding itself was beautiful and we had a great time. The next day, we went to Niagara Falls itself. We took one of the 'Maid of the Mist' boats right up to the Horseshoe Falls. We were near the front of the boat as we cruised up to the Falls. The boat stopped a safe distance away, but I was in awe. First, there was the wind and water. Even though we were wearing one of those plastic hoodies that they give you to wear, whatever is exposed gets totally drenched, and somehow the water finds its way to your clothes anyway. Second, there was what we saw, or couldn't see: On that day, it was hard to look directly at the Falls because there was a strong wind that whipped the mist into my eyes. I couldn't even see the middle portion of the Falls because there was so much mist. It's like a mysterious veil that you know is right there. Then, third, there's the sound: Tons of water crashes down all around you from 175 feet above your head into the river below, so the sound is like thunder going on and on. Then there's the force of the water. The river is churning white all around you. The river is 180 feet deep at the point of the falls, so you get a sense that you're suspended right in between all this rushing water. Boy if something ever went wrong with the boat, you'd be history! The power in all the water crashing down would just crack rocks, not to mention boats and human bones, beneath it.

Hold on to that feeling of awe. I want to combine it with a feeling of unworthiness. There was one moment that stands out in my mind when I felt really unworthy. It wasn't when I was standing in Notre Dame in Paris, France, or the St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City in Rome. It was when I was praying with two very godly women. One of them was named Jennifer Espinosa. The other was a Catholic nun whom I only knew as Sister Margarita. I was living in East Palo Alto, CA in a Mexican immigrant community. These two women and I met just for a simple prayer time, to pray for our neighbors and friends. But I knew how much sacrifice these women had made. I knew to some degree what pains they had suffered. And so when I heard them pray, I wept. Their prayers were simple, but profound, deep, filled with such personal knowledge of people, and I could tell they were being considerate and polite. I, on the other hand, felt like I was totally unworthy to be there. I felt the urge to run away.

Put those feelings of awe and unworthiness together, and you get a little of what it's like to be in God's presence. First, you feel like you are drowning in the majesty of God. 'The train of His robe [was] filling the temple.' God's majesty drives out any pretense of human pride. This was the place that Uzziah dared to act presumptuously and was stricken with leprosy. No wonder – something went wrong with his heart, and the majesty of God filled the space around him and revealed on the outside what had just happened on the inside: he became unclean and diseased. When God's majesty fills the place, you are welcome to bow in humility. But there is no room left for your ego. The force of His glory will turn it inside out and push it out so you have to deal with it. Second, there was what you can see and can't see. These angels are seraphim, which means 'fiery' (Ex.3:1 – 6; 13:21; 19:18; Lev.10:1 – 2; Num.11:1 – 2; 1 Ki.18:24). Fire converts mass into energy, and these beings burn with a fire of purity that burns away anything impure. Their power is to represent the holiness of God. Yet even these amazing and strange beings can't see God face to face directly, so they covered their faces with their wings. Nor can they expose the lowliest parts of their bodies, their feet, before God, so they covered their feet with their wings. If these powerful beings can't be fully exposed to God, how can you and I? What cover would we hide under? What parts of ourselves would we feel ashamed of? Third, there's the sound. The angels thundered in a triple chorus, 'Holy,' making the foundations tremble. To repeat something three times in the Hebrew Bible is to say that it is the utmost of that quality. God is 'holy' beyond our comprehension. Over and over, you hear them declare that God is the Lord of the heavenly armies, who actually fills the earth with His glory, too, if we have eyes to see it. So how do we respond to this God? Well, how does Isaiah respond? He responds by letting God burn something away from him.

The Cleansing: v.6 – 7

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs.

⁷ He touched my mouth with it and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.'

That has got to hurt! Isaiah doesn't record the physical pain that this must have caused him, even if it was in the vision and not in 'real life.' Last summer, my family and I went camping in the Berkshires. I was sitting on a chair with my back towards the campfire. A cinder popped off a wooden log, burned a small hole through the back of my shirt, and touched my skin. I jumped up in pain. And that was a tiny little thing. In Isaiah's vision, God takes a burning coal and touches Isaiah's lips with it.

Why is the sin of the lips associated with Isaiah? Because he needs to be purified to proclaim. And to say some godly things, you need to let God purge out the selfish things. But there's more to it than that. Isaiah knows that this

is what God wants to do with everyone. He has already described Jerusalem, the capital city of the chosen people, what was supposed to be the New Eden, the source of life for the world, as a place of sin. Corruption runs in government (Isa.1:10, 17, 23, 27; 3:14 – 15). Youth gangs run the streets (Isa.3:5). Sin is everywhere. And to speak into that situation, to call the people back to God, is going to take a word from God. Especially when God is the One who speaks new life into being. He spoke life into being in Genesis 1. He will speak new life or renewed life into being now. And Isaiah is essentially saying what Jesus would say seven centuries later: ‘The things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, adulteries, murders...’ and so on (Mt.15:18 – 19). So cleansing the lips, purging the evil from the lips, is a symbol of cleansing the heart. It is taking a burning coal to the heart. Just as Isaiah had said earlier: ‘I will also turn My hand against you, and will smelt away your dross as with lye, and will remove all your alloy’ (Isa.1:25). God’s burning holiness is like this fiery coal.

God wants to burn something away from us. God wants our being and our words to reflect Him. Ultimately, the Word of God took hold of human flesh in a human body (Jn.1:14). Jesus burned away that sinful and selfish part of his heart, the part that should have never been there to begin with. That’s why we see Jesus struggle with temptation in the wilderness and the Garden of Gethsemane. Within himself, he touched the pure fire of God’s holiness to the corruption of the human heart and melted that corruption down, purified the heart, and made it new. He forged a new humanity so he could share it with us.

Perhaps that is why this experience is not merely painful, but also joyful. Richard Rolle, an English Christian writing in 1343, described this experience as ‘The Fire of Love.’ Here is what he wrote: ‘The time I first felt my heart begin to warm—I have been amazed more than I am able to say. I felt it truly, not simply in my imagination, but just as though my heart was burning with a physical fire... It was so vivid an experience that often I put my hand against my chest just to see if I could feel any cause for the heat outwardly! But once I knew that it was purely a matter of inward, spiritual nature... I realized it had to be a gift from my Creator. Accordingly I was glad, and melted with a desire for a greater experience of love... Truly it enflames the soul just as if a real fire were burning there.’¹

The Mission: v.8 – 13

But once God burns that stuff away, what does He do with us? He sends us on His mission. We see that in v.8 – 10: ‘⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’⁹ He said, ‘Go, and tell this people: ‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.’¹⁰ Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed.’”

What? How many of us would want an assignment like that? That sounds...weird! Jesus quotes this very section when he tells parables (Mt.13:11 – 17). Now it’s not that God wanted Isaiah, Jesus, or us to speak gibberish. It’s also not that God is rejecting people. It’s just that when you say something for so long to people, they stop listening. Familiarity will breed contempt. The freshness of these words will no longer charge people up. Verses 11 – 13 explain more: ‘¹¹Then I said, ‘Lord, how long?’ And He answered, ‘Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant, houses are without people and the land is utterly desolate,¹² the LORD has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.¹³ Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, and it will again be subject to burning, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.’”

Illus: In their book, *Where Resident Aliens Live*, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon tell of the old Baptist country preacher who was called to a church in rural Georgia. The church had tried to call a series of other pastors – better preachers, by reputation – and had failed. So they turned to this lay preacher. After they hired him and heard one of his sermons they informed him that the church did not want any newfangled ideas and definitely did not want any ‘colored’ members. The next Sunday that preacher preached a sermon against this racial attitude, telling them, ‘If you love Jesus, you’ve got to love everybody Jesus loved.’ A number of the congregation told him they did not like such attitudes. Still, the preacher persisted, saying, ‘If you love Jesus, you’ve got to love everybody Jesus loves.’ Many people left the congregation in protest. A number of African-American people joined. More people left. ‘I preached that congregation down to almost nothing before it started to grow again,’ said the preacher. ‘And

¹ Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love* (ca. 1343), in David Lyle Jeffrey (editor), *The Law of Love: English Spirituality in the Age of Wyclif* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p.183 – 184. Later, John Wesley and Blaise Pascal were others who spoke of their hearts being strangely warmed.

then it grew and grew into a strong, inclusive congregation. Like I said,' the preacher explained, 'if you love Jesus, you've got to love everybody Jesus loves.'

That is very much like what Isaiah is describing here. There will be a process of narrowing down God's true people. First, Babylon is going to take Israel into exile. That's what the phrase in v.11 – 12 means: 'Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant, houses are without people and the land is utterly desolate, the LORD has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.' Once the Israelites became a small minority in the big bad foreign land, they just wanted to protect their cultural identity, which they thought was just cultural and ethnic. They interpreted themselves as victims. When European-American settlers were a small minority in the world of Native Americans and European powers, they just wanted to protect their cultural identity, which they thought was just cultural and ethnic. They interpreted themselves as victims. 'We keep aiming for religious freedom and fight state control.' Or minority groups focus on the dream of success. In the same way, back then, the Israelites became more and more focused on their own pain and their own purity. They read Isaiah and the other prophets, but it got old. God's vision lost its freshness. It became too burdensome to actually dream about. For six to seven hundred years, reciting God's vision became ritual. So when Jesus began his ministry in Nazareth in Luke 4 and said that he wanted to show God's grace to the *Gentiles*, quoting Isaiah itself, they were furious and tried to throw him off a cliff! God tells Isaiah up front that His big vision of reaching all the nations would not be too exciting for Israel. His preaching is going to last a long time, during his lifetime, and even longer through his writings. Listening, they will not perceive. Looking, they will not understand. They will get used to this language, this prophecy, but it will become old hat, familiar, and no longer fresh and cutting. That is why they will not return to God to be healed, according to v.10.

Yet, second, they will need to be purified even more, in v.13: '13 Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, and it will again be subject to burning, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.' God will start over. He will purify the people down to...actually, down to one person: Jesus. Jesus is that holy seed, the stump. And from that seed and on that stump of Jesus, God will build a renewed Israel, the disciples, who would love everybody Jesus loves. And from there, the tree will grow again.

But let's not fool ourselves. It's not that growth is easy. The same thing still happens. The top priority in our Gathering mission statement now is to call people to be transformed by Jesus as we ourselves are being transformed. But when we first put that in the mission statement, some people were uncomfortable with it. There are times that it makes me uncomfortable, too, because it's so radical. But for people to love everybody Jesus loves – and *with* his love, *in the way* he loves them, *calling for them to submit themselves to his purifying touch* – that's hard.

Illus: When I worked at Intel in the late 1990's, before I moved to Boston, I really wanted people to come to know Jesus. I wanted my coworkers to find their identity in Jesus, not in their performance, or relationships, or whatever. But that meant that I had to find my identity in Jesus, and let Jesus burn away all the rest. The parts of me that put my identity in my performance, or relationships, or whatever – those things I needed to surrender to him.

So, it's not that God is unclear, as we'll see in later chapters. God's message would be clear. It's just that people won't like it. They will not turn around. It sounds as if God doesn't want people to come back to Him, and be healed. So what's going on?

Illus: In *The Hobbit* movie, Bilbo is afraid. He doesn't want to leave the Shire for this great adventure. But Gandalf sits down with him and says, 'You're not just a Baggins. You're a Took. You're the son of Belladonna Took. Your ancestor used a club to lop off the head of a goblin king. That is similar, I think, to what God is saying to us. Who will go for us? I hope we can say, 'Here I am. Cleanse me, and send me.'