

A Threefold Call

Isaiah 6:1-8 (NRSV)

“In the year that King Uzziah died...”

These words probably don’t mean anything to those of us who are removed from the ancient world and who have no monarchy – although now we Americans want to claim the Duchess of Sussex as our own! With all the hype over the royal wedding you’d think we had “crown fever” here in the U.S. But I suppose on this Memorial Day weekend especially, we are reminded of the freedoms of our elective, democratic society and the sacrifices of those who have helped preserve it.

We may not have a monarchy but we can understand that the death of a king would be a tumultuous event in the ancient world. And King Uzziah wasn’t just any king.¹

It was the 8th century BCE. Uzziah took the throne at the age of 16, and reigned for about 52 years. His reign was one of the most prosperous since the time of Solomon. He was resourceful in

his military might – which was lauded back then even as it is today. He refortified the country, reorganized and reequipped the army, and personally engaged in agricultural pursuits. He was a vigorous and able ruler, and *“his name spread abroad, even to the entrance in of Egypt,”* (2 Chronicles 26:8-14).²

But – not unlike people with power today – it was King Uzziah’s pride that led to his downfall. He entered the temple to burn incense on the altar. Azariah the High Priest at the time saw this as an attempt to usurp the priests and so he confronted King Uzziah with a band of eighty priests, saying, *“It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense,”* (2 Chronicles 26:18). Historian Josephus wrote that in that moment *“a great earthquake shook the ground and a crack was made in the temple, and the bright rays of the sun shone through it, and fell upon the king’s face, and*

¹ Peter Lockhart, “The year King Uzziah died!” *A Different Heresy* (29 May 2012), accessed on 27 May 2018 at <http://revplockhart.blogspot.com/2012/05/year-king-uzziah-died.html>.

² Numerous authors, “Uzziah,” *Wikipedia* (9 May 2018), accessed on 27 May 2018 at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uzziah>.

leprosy seized upon him immediately.” (Josephus Flavius, Antiquities IX 10:4). He was driven from the Temple and compelled to reside in *“a separate house”* until his death (2 Kings 15:5, 27; 2 Chronicles 26:3).³

Essentially, as the story goes, Uzziah was successful for decades, but then when pride got the best of him he was smote by God, dethroned and quarantined, and 50+ years of building stability came crashing down.

Add these circumstances to the general sense of dislocation and instability that comes with the death of any King, and Isaiah’s words (*“In the year that King Uzziah died...”*) begin to carry some weight, for us who are so far removed.⁴

We might begin to get a sense of the weight of this time-defining event if we modernize it a bit...

In the year that Pearl Harbor was bombed...

In the year that John F. Kennedy was assassinated...

In the year that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated...

³ Wikipedia, *ibid.*

In the year of 9/11...

In the year that Katrina hit...that Harvey hit...

In the year of Columbine or Sandy Hook or the Pulse Night Club...

On a more personal level, we all have our own ways of marking time:

In the year that mother died...

In the year that my son was diagnosed...

In the year that I lost my job...

In the year that we had the accident...

The point being: we mark time by significant events in our lives and like Isaiah, as we pass through transitions or crises, God may well meet us there with a new vision and a fresh word.

It is in the midst of human loss and suffering, in the midst of separation and disconnection that Isaiah sees a grand vision of God including the ever-living praise coming out of the mouths of the seraphim:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: The whole earth is full of

⁴ Lockhart, *ibid.*

your glory!”

These words of praise derived from scripture are actually the oldest known part of the modern liturgy of the church...they are a *sanctus*, or an early church hymn. They date back as far as the first century and they became an integral part of the Eucharistic worship of the church by the 6th century.⁵

From the early church on, the hope of worship is that when we say (or sing) these words we too are transported into God’s majestic presence as the divisions created by time and space crumble away and as the false divisions of our human brokenness are transcended.⁶

These are words not only of praise but of hope...hope that in the face of whatever we might be experiencing God is being worshipped and adored.⁷

In the context of Isaiah’s vision we are reminded that whatever is happening: the death of King Uzziah, war, terrorism, economic meltdown, ecological crises, the death of someone we love, the terminal prognosis, or whatever trial we may be experiencing: God is to be praised and is worthy of

such praise.⁸

This sentiment forms the first call in what (on this Trinity Sunday) I am calling the “threefold call” of Isaiah’s vision...which is not just a call for Isaiah, but for us as well.

With all the graduations in the month of May, we might think of commencement ceremonies as a parallel vision to that of Isaiah’s. We are reminded at graduations, for a brief moment and sometimes by an inspiring speech, that there’s a whole big world out there – and we have just seen the tip of the iceberg. Our lives have been full and amazing and we’ve done great things as students...but it’s only just the beginning. The future is grand – it is wide open space – it is nothing but potential and possibility. Like the flowing robes from God in Isaiah’s vision, students imagine their futures flowing out before them as they journey into the world beyond their high school or college reality.

Mountaintop experiences and travel have a way of doing this too...of expanding our vision and seeing that there is something, namely God, that is so much bigger than us. As my yoga instructor Billy always says at the beginning of our practice “*offer*

⁵ Lockhart, *ibid.*
⁶ Lockhart, *ibid.*

⁷ Lockhart, *ibid.*
⁸ Lockhart, *ibid.*

your practice up to some thing bigger than yourself...someone, some thing, some place...” Yoga can be a very personal practice, but by setting an intention that is for the wider world, you open your eyes and heart up to the needs of those around you and the wonder of the world beyond you.

So again, the **first call** in our threefold call as Christians, is simply to not get distracted by our fear-filled world but to recognize the majesty and wonder of God and to rest for a few moments in that state of awe. Your image of God doesn’t have to be one on a throne with a long robe and seraphim fluttering about...it can be something else entirely...anything that pulls you out of yourself and into the awe and mystery of the divine.

But sometimes, in the midst of such awe, mystery, and majesty, we can feel very small and unworthy, like our lives won’t make a difference. This is what Isaiah struggles with, and his confession, *“Woe is me, I am lost...I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips...”* is a reminder of our **second call**: to name and acknowledge our role and participation in the state of unrest in the world and in our lives. Isaiah’s confession shows us that

he understands that is not just *his* lips that are unclean...it’s the whole system around him too...and before God can use him to help do something about it, Isaiah has to open his eyes to it.

We often think about confessing sin as admitting guilt. And when we do that, sin becomes this thing that makes us feel bad and unworthy. Sometimes, confessing sin can actually make us more spiteful and resentful – which the exact opposite intention of confession! Christ has forgiven all of our sins. God loves us unconditionally. Nothing can change that. But oftentimes this idea of confessing our sins has led to a theology that puts us in the role of always trying to appease God. God doesn’t seek to be appeased. God seeks to be loved. And God seeks for us to love others and ourselves.

So how can we make “confession of sin” something that doesn’t make us feel guilty or unworthy? Well, perhaps we can try changing our thinking about it altogether. Because many of the sins we are a part of systemically are things we are completely blind to – we are unaware of our participation and complicitness. Simply becoming aware is a huge first step...and that is the kind of confession, or admission, that helps begin to heal

our society. Confessing sin for the purpose of beating ourselves up helps no one. But as Isaiah shows us, admitting our participation in language or systems or behaviors that harm others or our world or ourselves – well, that is a powerful springboard for change.

A few weeks ago, Becky Whitaker, Christine Flug, and myself – all members of the leadership team for our Calvary/New Hope partnership – went to a training held by Denver Public Schools called “becoming a culturally responsive educator.” One of the things Dr. Rosemarie Allen worked with us on is recognizing our implicit biases and how we can become aware of the ways they manifest in our words and actions.

The most powerful thing that I took away from that seminar was that I do not have to feel guilty or ashamed of my implicit biases. I knew I had them – be it implicit racism or prejudice or judgements of people based on looks, socio-economic level, race, education, etc. But what she said is that we don’t have to feel bad about ourselves for having them – because we are all products of our culture and how we are raised and we are constantly being fed messages by our culture and media and world that feed these biases.

We don’t need to feel guilty, she said. Guilt doesn’t create goodness. We need to learn to recognize these biases, and gradually change them.

Again, this gets us out of a system of blame, and instead puts us in a system of change. I know one thing I have been working on is becoming aware of how I speak about people...instead of naming people as “homeless,” Pastor Morgan has taught me the language of “people experiencing homelessness.” This is person-first language. I don’t call someone who lives in a home a “home owner” or “apartment renter” so why would I name and call someone “homeless” as their first identifier? And yet we do it all the time...and in doing so...we remove dignity from that person and we make assumptions about them that may or may not be true, and even if they are true, should in no way define them.

When we recognize things like this about our language, we are “confessing our sin” so to speak in a way that doesn’t shame me for speaking the way I have been, but rather encourages me to change the way I speak moving forward.

And I think this is what happens to Isaiah...he realizes the magnitude of God and what God represents

and says, “*Woe is me.*” But it’s not a pity party. He says, “*I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips...*” but now, but now “*I have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.*” In other words, Isaiah was speaking and acting one way, and upon seeing the majesty and character of God right before his eyes, he is no longer blind or deaf to his behaviors. He is enlightened. And energized to change. At its best...this is what worship does for us each week. It allows us to see and experience God in such a way that we see ways that our own behaviors can be changed so that we embody and reflect the loving nature of our loving God even more. When that happens, we are not only forgiven by God, as Isaiah is...we are freed to be our best selves.

Isaiah is forgiven by God and that empowers him to answer the **third call**: saying, “*Here I am Lord.*” This call is about being open to the ways that God wants to use us in the world as a vessel for healing and love and being open to that call wherever it leads. If you keep reading, you’ll see that it doesn’t lead to an easy place for Isaiah...the road actually gets harder, not easier, but the

difference is – he is with God, and not on his own.

At the turn of the sixteenth century Copernicus formulated the theory that, contrary to appearances, the sun does not revolve around the earth, but the earth goes ‘round the sun. In the same way, when we search for what we should do in life, we at first place ourselves at the center of our world, and try to make sense of it, while thinking that God is part of our life...somewhere out there orbiting around. But perhaps (as one pastor put it) what we need to do is to experience our own “Copernican revolution”: and realize that God is not part of our life, rather we are part of God’s life.⁹ When we have that moment of realization, it’s at that point, that we’ll find ourselves saying, “*Here am I, Lord, send me!*” before we even know what we’re signing up for!

It’s a discovery of vocation that is based on God’s leading and not on our own ambition.

It was divine serendipity that Richard Rohr’s daily devotion for today was on Vocation. It’s almost as if he was reading Isaiah 6 too. He writes,

⁹ Author unknown, “Commented Bible Passage,” *Taizé* (1 May 2018), accessed on 27 May 2018 at http://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2009-09-01.

“God’s image within each of us is inherent and irrevocable. . .

Vocation is one way in which we discover and grow into [this image] our “True Self.” I’m not speaking so much about education, career, or livelihood, though in some cases they might overlap.

Vocatio means “a call or summons” in Latin. Vocation is a Larger Life that somehow calls us forward, more than we call it to us. We do not know its name yet, so how can we call it? If we engineer the process too much, we often mistake a security-based occupation for our soul’s vocation.”¹⁰

Then Rohr references Parker Palmer, a Quaker teacher and activist who wrote in his book, *Let Your Life Speak*:

[There are] moments when it is clear—if I have the eyes to see—that the life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me. In those moments I sometimes catch a glimpse of my true life, a life hidden like the river beneath the ice. And . . . I wonder: What am I meant to do? Who am I meant to be?¹¹

The story of Isaiah’s vocation is written in incredible language, that is a grand vision, but it is the story of the awakening of a human being to his true calling.¹²

To sum up this threefold calling:

- 1) In a world that seems out of our control, we worship to remind ourselves of God’s majesty and glory;
- 2) we confess our sin as a means of recognizing that our own actions play a part in the state of our world and life;
- 3) and upon realizing God’s forgiveness, we are renewed to get up and try again to make a difference in the world as God’s agents of love and grace.

This threefold call is a pattern that repeats itself throughout our lives, sometimes even, every day.

It is the first Sunday of the summer. I encourage you to focus on one part of this threefold call over the next three months.

- 1) **If you choose the first part of the call:** Commit to come to worship every Sunday you are in town, and when you are out of town, if you’re able attend another church or worship with

¹⁰ Richard Rohr, “Vocation,” *Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation* (27 May 2018), accessed on 27 May 2018 at <http://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/CA9EB8D9D76F693E25>

[40FE23F30FEDED/DE1C85C092E4A165C06B463AA70A4E2C](https://www.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/40FE23F30FEDED/DE1C85C092E4A165C06B463AA70A4E2C).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Taizé, *ibid.*

us via the webcast. And in addition to corporate worship, find other ways to sit in the presence of God and worship. Perhaps you might try attending the Threshold, which is a community that meets here in our chapel every Sunday evening at 5pm on Sundays to pray together in the style of Taizé...through scripture, song, and silence.

2) **If you choose the second part of the call:** Actively pay attention to your language and behaviors and implicit biases. Ask others to be honest with you about how they experience your relationship with them. Read books and articles by authors who are very different from you. And don't beat yourself up when you realize you've been doing something that has been less than sensitive to others. Acknowledge it, be grateful you're awake and aware to it now, and work to catch that speech or behavior in your life and change it. Use confession as a way to create change in your life.

3) **And if you choose the third part of the call:** Ponder this...What is God calling you to do in this world of unrest? Have you heard this call before but perhaps have been making

excuses saying to yourself "now is not a good time?" If so, remember Isaiah's call came "In the year that King Uzziah died..." aka: in the year that "slime hit the fan." God is calling you. God is always calling us. Because, God knows, that in serving and loving others, we learn to better love and worship God...and the cycle of the threefold call begins again...

Now is the time to worship God more fully, to confess our sins and change our behavior more readily, and to answer God's call more readily.

"In the summer of 2018..." (dot dot dot)...what follows is up to God...**and** to you.

Amen.