

May 30, 2021
The Holy Trinity
Year B
Isaiah 6:1-8
Romans 8:12-17
John 3:1-17
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Holy, Holy, Holy, God is Calling

It was the year the king Uzziah died. That's what we're told in our reading from Isaiah. A little piece of information, that might even seem a little bit insignificant to us. After all, none of us probably know who King Uzziah was and we probably don't care too much about the fact that he died. But for Isaiah, for the people of Judah, the fact that it was the year that King Uzziah died would have been of enormous significance.

King Uzziah was a good king. He was one of the few good kings that the people of Judah had known. He sought God and, in the eyes of his people, his reign was blessed.

He was successful in warfare against the Philistines. The Ammonites paid him tribute. He built towers in Jerusalem and strengthened its defenses. Judah had a large and powerful standing army under his reign. The land was prosperous while he was king. He himself had large herds and fertile vineyards and we learn in 2 Chronicles chapter 26, where his story is told, that he loved the soil. All in all, the reign of King Uzziah was a bright spot in the story of the kingdom of Judah.

But it was the year the King Uzziah died, a good king, a powerful king, and the people of Judah didn't know what would come next. Would his son Jotham be a good king or a bad king, would the people and the land know

victory and prosperity under him or not? Their future was up in the air, a mystery, an unknown.

It was the year that King Uzziah died and to Isaiah, at work as a priest in the Temple, God came. Holy, holy, holy, God came and Isaiah said, “Woe is me. I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5)

Isaiah was terrified at the vision of God that he had received. Isaiah saw God, he saw God’s glory, he was in the presence of God’s holiness and he knew that all was lost, but then, a seraph touched his lips and said to him, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” (Isaiah 6:7)

Isaiah was not worthy. He did not feel himself to be worthy of a vision of God, certainly, he did not feel himself worthy of being God’s messenger, but God said, “Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?” (Isaiah 6:8a)

And Isaiah said, “Here am I; send me!” (Isaiah 6:8b)

So, God sent Isaiah to call God’s people, a people who lived in the midst of fear and uncertainty, a people who lived in the midst of political upheaval, back to holiness, back to justice, back to mercy, back to faithfulness.

It was the year that king Uzziah died and God called Isaiah, a man of unclean lips.

It was the year 30 and Israel lived under Roman rule and Roman oppression. They lived in fear of political persecution, walking a tightrope of faithfulness to God and faithfulness to Rome.

In the year 30, there were some who believed that they should revolt against Rome and some who believed that they should keep their heads down and worship the Lord quietly, not drawing attention to themselves.

There were some who believed that the prophet who came from Nazareth named Jesus was the man who would rally the people and lead the

revolution and there were some who believed that he needed to be silenced before he did something crazy that brought Roman wrath down on all of them.

It was the year 30 and Israel lived under Roman rule and Roman oppression and Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews came to Jesus by night. He came because he was curious. He wanted to know who and what Jesus was. He wanted to know where Jesus' power came from. He wanted to understand Jesus' message.

And Jesus told him, told him about being born from above, told him about being born of water and the Spirit, told him, most importantly, that, he, Jesus, had been sent into the world to show and to share God's love for the world.

Nicodemus listened, Nicodemus tried, but Nicodemus didn't understand. "How can these things be?" he asked (John 3:9).

He struggled to understand God's renewing power. He struggled to understand God's Spirit at work in the world. He struggled to understand the power of God's love.

John chapter three tells us about Nicodemus coming to Jesus under the cover of darkness, coming at night, afraid to be seen talking to the controversial teacher. It doesn't tell us about any great revelation or realization that Nicodemus had about Jesus. It just tells us about his fear, his questions. It tells us that he didn't understand.

But John chapter nineteen tells us about Nicodemus coming to Jesus again. Coming to Jesus, the condemned criminal, who had been rejected by the religious leaders and executed as a traitor by Rome, Nicodemus came to Jesus again, after his death, bringing myrrh and aloes, so that he could help Joseph of Arimathea bury him. Nicodemus, who didn't understand, stood

with Jesus when there was nothing for him to gain and everything for him to lose.

It was the year 30 and Israel lived under Roman rule and Roman oppression and God spoke to Nicodemus, a man who didn't understand.

It was the year 34 and Israel lived under Roman rule and Roman oppression, and the church was being persecuted; persecuted by its own mother religion. And there was a man named Saul, who breathed threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord (Acts 9:1).

Saul held the coats of the men who stoned Stephen, Saul went into the houses of the believers and dragged off men and women, throwing them into prison. Saul went to the high priest in Jerusalem and asked him for letters for the synagogue in Damascus, so that he could continue his persecution of the Christians there.

It was the year 34 and Saul breathed threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. And on his way to Damascus, God spoke to Saul. He had a vision of Jesus who said to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me" (Acts 9:4). Saul was made blind, then he was healed by a Christian, Ananias, and his life became something different. The church that he had persecuted became his life, his mission, his heart.

He himself said in his first letter to the church in Corinth, "Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:8-10a).

Saul, who in his ministry to the Greek world, was called Paul, knew that he was not worthy of God's love and of God's work and yet, he poured out his life for God, grateful for God's grace and mercy.

And in our reading for today from Romans, he recognizes God's power in our lives by reminding us that it is the Spirit who gives us faith.

"When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness in our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:15b-16).

It was the year 34 and God spoke to Paul, a persecutor of the church, a man who couldn't see how God was working in the world.

It was the year the king Uzziah died and God came to a man of unclean lips. It was the year 30 the year of Roman rule and Roman oppression and God came to Nicodemus, a frightened man who came to Jesus by night and who didn't understand. It was the year 34 and God came to Saul, a persecutor of the church a man who couldn't see how God was working in the world.

The holy, holy, holy God, the three times holy, the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit came to three men, a priest of unclean lips, a man who couldn't understand Jesus' words, and a persecutor of the church.

And one must ask, must ask especially on Holy Trinity Sunday, why? Why couldn't God just do it all himself. God the three in one, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; why did God need or want a priest of unclean lips, a man who didn't understand, or a persecutor of the church?

Well, the fact is, God could have done it all by himself. God had all of the love, all of the fellowship, all of the unity, all of the peace, all of the power, as part of God's very nature. God lacks nothing. God didn't need Isaiah or Nicodemus or Paul, but God wanted them.

The love of the trinity is not contained within the holy three in one. It spills out, it pours out, it rains down, on the creation that God made in love, and loves in mercy and sacrifice. And God's call continues.

It is the year 2021. It is a year that is a reckoning.

It is a year when we are facing the trauma of the year that has come before as the end of the pandemic peeks at us from a horizon that suddenly seems to be much closer.

We have to explore the next normal, after a pandemic has held us in thrall, and spent more than a year stalled out over our communities, our families, our country, and our world, leaving quick destruction and slow-moving harm in its wake. Harm in terms of grief for the lost, lost loved ones, lost time, lost business, lost jobs, lost celebrations, lost education. Harms in terms of mental health anxiety, depression, deep uncertainty about what will come next for us. Harm in terms of deep disappointment held by some about our societal failure to work together to be considerate of each other, to put others needs ahead of our own desires, to act for the common good. Challenge in terms of the having to face the reality that the normal that we long for, will never be the normal that we remember, that we will have to create whatever comes next, seeking wisdom, seeking healing, seeking reconciliation from what has been to build a new future.

It is the year 2021 and it is a year that is a reckoning not just because of the Covid pandemic, but also because of the epidemic of racism that still afflicts us, as a people, as a nation, and we cannot close our eyes cannot close our hearts again.

It is the year 2021 and it is a year that is a reckoning, because of the violence that afflicts us making homes, workplaces, grocery stores, clubs, public parks, houses of worship, and always schools, places of potential danger, and people always think that it couldn't happen here, where they work, where they live, until it does.

It is the year 2021, a year when we are living with the uncertainty of what comes next, a year when we hope for a savior to come, equipped for the troubles of this time.

And God, the holy, holy, holy God who called Isaiah, says to a people, a people of unclean lips, “Come, and work for me. Don’t just hope for a better future, build one.”

And God the holy, holy, holy God, who met Nicodemus by night, with his fears, with his questions, says to a people who often do not understand, “Come and work for me. Believe that I, the Lord of love, can do impossible things in you and through you.”

And God, the holy, holy, holy God, who called Saul, a persecutor of the church, and transformed his life, says to a people, a people who persecute each other, by loving their own point of view more than their neighbors; a people who persecute the church by loving their own agendas more than they love their brothers and sisters, “Come, work for me. See beyond your own point of view, your own perspective, your own prejudices, and look with my eyes, the eyes of a loving father for the world and share that love with the world.”

And we are there. In all of it, as people who of unclean lips, as people who do not understand, as people who cannot see and who persecute those we do not understand.

But still the God of Isaiah, the God of Nicodemus, the God of Saul, who became Paul, comes to us, speaks to us, calls us.

And when God, the holy, holy, holy God, comes, speaks, calls, “Whom shall I send?”

God, we pray, give us the strength of your triune life to say, “Here are we. Send us.” Amen.