

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Trinity, Series B
Saturday, May 26th, 2018
Sunday, May 27th, 2018

Sermon: Long Live the King!

Text: Isaiah 6:1-13

Focus: The Holy God forgives our sins and commissions us to go share his Word.

Function: That as forgiven sinners they would proclaim the holiness of God.

Structure: Story-Interrupted

Locus: “Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is forgiveness...” (SC, What Is Confession?).

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!” (2 Cor. 13:14, ESV).¹ Amen. The king is dead. Long live the King! So begins our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 6, in which the prophet beholds a glorious vision of the living God and receives his commission to go and speak God’s Word. In America, we don’t have much use for royalty. We got rid of our last king in 1776. So, despite the large television audience last weekend for Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, royal protocol is far removed from our experience.

Ordinarily, in a monarchy, as soon as the old king dies, the kingdom hails the king’s son with the words “Long live the king!” Let’s practice that: The king is dead. *Long live the king!* Isaiah saw his vision “in the year that King Uzziah died” (Isa. 6:1). Uzziah enjoyed a long and prosperous reign of 52 years (2 Chronicles 26). He received an overall positive assessment by the Chronicler because “he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD” (2 Chr. 26:4). “But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense” (2 Chr. 26:16).

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Kings were prohibited from performing priestly duties, but Uzziah tried to usurp that authority for himself. So Yahweh struck him with leprosy, cutting him off from God's Temple. Because of his leprosy, King Uzziah became an unclean outcaste, and he had to cede the throne to his son before he died, reigning as coregents together.

Now the king is dead. *Long live the king!* But instead of proclaiming Jotham king, God shows up and gives Isaiah a vision to remind Israel who is really King:

“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. 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. And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!’ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke” (Isa. 6:1-4).

The king is dead. *Long live the King!*

But the true King of Israel is no mere mortal. The King is Yahweh, the only true God and Creator of the universe. Isaiah sees Yahweh sitting on his heavenly throne with the earth as his footstool below (cf. 66:1). The train of his robe fills the Temple, which was the meeting place between God and man. Attended by the strange, six-winged creatures called *seraphim* (Hebrew for “burning ones”), Yahweh receives the praise of heaven in the triple Holy we sing during Communion: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (6:3).

How many of us have longed and wished to behold God in a vision like this?! Which of us has not wished that the invisible curtain would be pulled back and we could see God in all of his awesomeness and glory? Yet Isaiah's reaction to this worship service is not to join in the hymn or jump up and down, shouting “Praise the Lord!” Instead, he is completely undone and needs a new pair of pants. Overwhelmed by the smoke and shaking walls and loud cries of the seraphim, Isaiah falls on his hands and knees and cries out in alarm: “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!” (Isa. 6:5).

“Woe is me!” Confronted by the holy terror of the awesome God, Isaiah says that he is “undone.” The Hebrew word can mean “destroyed” or “silenced.” The prophet is horrified at his unholy sin. “I am a man of unclean lips,” he says, which is a powerful, straightforward confession of sin. We are all sinners. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way...” (Isa. 53:6a). We do things our way instead of God’s way. We disobey his commandments and reject his Word. For this we deserve to be silenced and destroyed. “Woe is me! For I am lost...”

Yet the prophet also speaks on behalf of his entire nation. Isaiah adds, “I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” There is an old saying that as the king, so goes the kingdom. King Uzziah was a leper, ceremonially unclean and cut off from God’s presence and worship in the Temple. The people of Israel were also unclean because of their idolatry and oppression of the poor. They rebelled against God and did not trust and follow Yahweh as their true King.

Isaiah was undone because he saw “the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isa. 6:5). Throughout the Book of Isaiah (30 times in 29 verses), the prophet repeatedly calls Yahweh “the Holy One” and “the Holy One of Israel.” God is holy, and we are not. We are all polluted with sin. Not just King Uzziah the leper, but we also “have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment...” (Isa. 64:6a). But God can allow no unclean thing to come into his presence (Rev. 21:27). Indeed, as Yahweh told Moses, “You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Ex. 33:20). Isaiah shouts in fear because he thinks he is about to *die*! For that is what we all deserve for our sin: eternal death for eternity and physical death immediately.

Yet the Holy King of Israel is a good and gracious God who longs to make his people holy. And sometimes, instead of destroying us for our sin, contact with him can actually *make* us holy! It is as Luther writes in the Large Catechism: Why is he the *Holy Spirit*? Because *he* makes us holy (LC II, 35-36).

So having heard Isaiah's confession, Yahweh sends one of the seraphim with a burning coal from the altar and presses that searing, burning coal against his mouth. *Tssssssss!* Ouch! Can you imagine how much that must have burned? Forgiveness is painful because it requires us to admit our sin. Forgiveness is also painful because it cost God the life of his Son Jesus. "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). But there is also no better medicine than God's grace. And so the angel proclaims absolution: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (Isa. 6:7). No matter how great Isaiah's sin, no matter how great Israel's sin—no matter how great *your* sin—God speaks his Gospel Word and burns away our sins. *Tssssssssss!* In a few minutes you will come to *this* altar in order to eat and drink Jesus' Body and Blood. These burning coals from the altar of the cross will touch your lips and take away your sin. Remember how much that hurts! And rejoice at how much it heals!

So far the scene has moved from worship to confess to absolution. Now the scene becomes one of commission. To this point, the only voices we have heard have been those of Isaiah and the seraphim. But now the King finally speaks: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Isa. 6:8a). Yahweh has a message that requires a messenger. Someone needs to tell his Word. And Isaiah, overjoyed by God's grace and filled with wonder, shouts, "Here am I! Send me!" (Isa. 6:8b). That is the right response of every forgiven sinner turned into a holy saint

by God's forgiveness. "Here am I! Send me!" God's love and mercy are too wonderful to keep to yourself. Others need to hear the Good News too! As we sing in our Communion liturgy:

"Thank the Lord and sing his praise; tell everyone what he has done!" (*Lutheran Service Book*).

God needs someone to go, and Isaiah volunteers for the job. As I said last week, if you enjoy a great meal at a new restaurant, you tell all your friends about that place. If you see a good movie, you encourage others to go. And if you, "a poor, miserable sinner" are undone by the holiness of God only to receive new life and forgiveness in Jesus' name, you cannot help but speak of what you have seen and heard (cf. Acts 4:20). Yahweh's call goes out, and Isaiah answers the call. And so do we. "Go!" Yahweh commands, and we go.

But the Word that God gives Isaiah to proclaim is a hard and difficult Word. Rather than a message of grace, Yahweh first gives Isaiah a Word of judgment. In the verses that follow our reading, God declares: "Go and say to this people:

'Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'
Make the heart of this people dull,
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" (Isa. 6:9-10).

In other words: Isaiah, go and preach judgment to these people. Speak in dark and mysterious ways that they do not understand so that they will not repent or be healed. For I have in mind to punish these people for their sins.

Now what kind of pastor wants to preach a sermon like that? What kind of prophet wants to speak in such a way that nobody understands a word he says? Not me! And certainly not Isaiah. Pastors love their people and want them to be saved. But God reminds us that we cannot

taste the sweetness of the Gospel until we have first choked on the bitterness of God's Law. The preacher cannot show us our Savior until he first shows our sin.

“How long?” Isaiah asks (6:11). How long does he have to preach doom and gloom, judgment and destruction? “How long, O Lord?”

Isaiah is not just asking how long his sermon should be. He's not wondering for how many days or weeks he should focus on the theme of destruction. He's not looking for information; he's expressing consternation. Isaiah's question is a kind of complaint that shows up over and over in the Scriptures, especially in the complaint Psalms:

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
 How long will you hide your face from me?
 How long must I take counsel in my soul
 and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
 How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (Ps. 13:1-2).

How long, O Lord? How long?! How long must I preach a Word that no one hears (cf. Isa. 53:1). How long do I spit in the wind and preach to deaf ears? How long do I preach fire and brimstone before your people kill me or fire me? How long before your people repent? How long before the world stops mocking the Church? How long before American becomes a Christian nation? How long before our moral fabric is torn in two? How long before persecution ends? How long, O Lord? How long?!

And Yahweh's answer is not a pleasant one—not at first. “Until,” Yahweh answers (6:11). until cities are laid waste, until Israel is sent into exile in a foreign land, until so many people are killed that the land is almost empty (v. 12). God says that his judgment on Jerusalem will be like a tree that gets cut down. But it's not enough just to *cut* down the tree; you have to burn the stump as well (v. 13). Talk about fire and brimstone! *Tssssssss!* God means business!

“How long?” we ask.

And God seems to say, “As long as it takes... Until my judgment is complete.”

But then in the very last phrase of the very last verse of this chapter, God holds out the olive branch of peace and gives us a glimmer of hope. After all those words about death and destruction, Yahweh offers the promise of new life: “The holy seed is its stump” (Isa. 6:13). It’s a strange statement, a cryptic codeword (just three words in the original Hebrew). “The holy seed is its stump.” Obviously, the stump is the defeated nation of Israel, the people of unclean lips with a leprous king and even a prophet who used to have unclean lips (cf. v. 5).

But what about this “holy seed”? Who or what is the seed? In chapter 11, Isaiah gives us another hint: “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him...” (Isa. 11:1-2a). Jesus is the little shoot that grew out of the stump of Jesse, the house of David, the royal family of Judah. Jesus is the little sprig of hope who brings new life out of death. He himself was killed on a tree (the cross) and rose again on the third day. Death does not have the final word. Judgment is not the only message God wants you to hear. “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for” (Isa. 6:7). There is *Good News* for those who believe in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Son of God, and the Holy One of Israel. The King was dead. Long live the King! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.