

IN THE YEAR THAT KING UZZIAH DIED

Isaiah 6:1–8

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on Trinity Sunday, May 27, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.’*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I 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!’

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’

And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’

It is likely that a few of us in this room remember where we were on December 7, 1941, when our nation was attacked at Pearl Harbor and when, the next day, families gathered around the radio to listen to President Roosevelt deliver his “day of infamy” speech.¹

More of us remember where we were when we learned that President John F. Kennedy was shot on November 22, 1963. I learned of it from my quiet, demure third grade teacher – Mrs. Tippet – who returned to our class after she had been mysteriously called into the principal’s office and told us in a near whisper that the President had been killed. School let out early. As I normally did I started walking home. A thunderstorm erupted and I slid into the back seat of a strange car whose door opened to welcome me into shelter and dry warmth.

The majority of us here remember where we were when the second plane struck the World Trade Tower on September 11, 2001, and then, 34 minutes later, when another plane struck the Pentagon. For some in this room, it meant the loss of colleagues, friends, perhaps family members; for all who lived here at the time it meant the sights and sounds we in other parts of the country received through television you received directly. It meant smells described by journalists in masks were smells that remained with you for days.

I.

A story that has circulated among preachers for years concerns a small, African-American Church in Michigan on that Sunday after the Kennedy assassination, a Sunday in which all across the land people poured out of their homes into houses of worship.

¹ Available at <http://time.com/4593483/pearl-harbor-franklin-roosevelt-infamy-speech-attack/>

In this particular church, the minister stepped to the pulpit, pulled the chain which turned on the light by which he could read, opened his Bible, and read words from Isaiah that open our scripture today:

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord.”

The minister then proceeded to ask his grieving, gathered congregation:

*In the year that we have lost our King,
In the year that we have lost our dashing young president,
Can we – can we – can we see the Lord?*

In the course of the sermon, it is as if the text leapt from Bibles open on laps and formed a cradle around the hearts of those who had turned to the church for solace.

The minister’s question can ring in our ears when something within us or in our lives has died.

In a year in which we have suffered loss:

*As a nation
As a people
As a civilization*

Can we see the Lord?

In a year in which we have experienced death:

*As a community
As a business
As a political party*

Can we see the Lord?

In a year in which we have seen breath its last:

*A movement of which we have been part
A cause to which we are committed
A way of life which we still think is best*

Can we see the Lord?

And even in a time when deep and lasting tragedy has come our way:

*The loss of a soldier
The death of a friend
The death of the person with whom we are closest and most at home*

Is it possible for us to see the Lord?

II.

The minister's question is so powerful I thought I would do some research on King Uzziah to see exactly what it was about him that people missed upon his death.

As I suspected, Uzziah is not one of the more famous kings of Israel: no David or Solomon, Josiah or Hezekiah.

Unlike the President we lost in 1963, Uzziah was neither “dashing” nor “young,” at least at the time of his death.

Eight centuries before the birth of Christ, he had ascended the throne in Jerusalem when he was but 16 years old, succeeding his father Amaziah.²

Uzziah reigned for 52 years.³

When he died his forehead was covered with leprosy, a condition which had come over him some years earlier when, after several decades of “dashing” success in battle, territorial expansion, infrastructure improvement, building of cities, digging of wells, and increased agricultural production, Uzziah – as the Chronicler says – “grew proud,” but proud “to his destruction.”

“Pride goeth before a fall,” says Proverbs,⁴ a saying that might have been coined with Uzziah in mind.

You see Uzziah had so expanded his power and empire that one day he decided he expand his reach into the very precincts in which God resides. Uzziah decided to *enter the Temple* to make an offering *himself* on the altar of incense.

Now in our day and time, we often take heart when our leaders enter a house of worship to make an offering to God, to simply be in the presence of something other than raw secular political power and raw partisan partisanship. I suspect that in addition to the appeal of romance and royal lifestyle, part of the reason so many got up so early last Saturday to watch the royal wedding was to catch a rare glimpse of people in power at prayer.

Most of the time, it is in fact reassuring to see leaders pray.

But Uzziah entered the Temple less to *make* an offering to God than to *draw* an offering from God.

You see, for Uzziah to make an offering in the Temple violated a role reserved for the priests.

It was a gross violation of what we would call “separation of church and state.”

It represented a poisonous mixture of “sacred and secular,” “religious and political,” in which the power of the secular would – through the figure of Uzziah – invariably *swallow up* and *obliterate* the power of the sacred.

When have we seen that?

But in the Temple, on the day the still dashing Uzziah enters, there is on duty a priest named Azariah – not very well remembered to history – as well as eighty other priests on duty.

² Uzziah's dates are placed at 783-742 BCE.

³ Uzziah's reign is covered in II Kings 14:21; II Kings 15:1-7; and II Chronicles 26:1-23.

⁴ Proverbs 16:18.

The Chronicler describes these priests as “men of valour.” In those days men they were to be sure. But they possessed valour. Courage. Inner strength. They had the ability and willingness to confront the powerful when the powerful overstepped their bounds and needed confronting.

Thus when Uzziah entered the Temple these priests of courage followed him through the Temple and confronted him:

*It is not for you, Uzziah,
To make offering to the Lord...*

*Go out of the sanctuary,
For you have done wrong,*

*... it will bring you no honour
From the Lord God.*

At this point Uzziah’s face reveals anger and umbrage, and across his furrowed forehead begins to develop a pasty powder. He leaves the Temple, for he knows that the leprosy that has broken out renders him ritually unclean.

Despite the fact that leprosy remains with Uzziah for the rest of his life, he is able to continue to rule (along with his son), but he lives in a residence separate from the palace.

When Uzziah dies, he is buried “near” but not “in” the royal cemetery, for he remains ritually unclean.

Despite these less productive latter years in Uzziah’s reign, we learn from the Chronicler that Uzziah was one of the *better* kings of the Southern Kingdom and that his rule was long enough, strong enough, and filled with enough accomplishments that the nation experienced a genuine sense of loss upon his death.

*In the year that King Uzziah died,
Can we see the Lord?*

III.

I don’t know if the minister in Michigan sought to describe what Isaiah saw, what exactly “seeing the Lord” might involve for us today, but Isaiah himself provides something of a description.

“...the Lord sitting on a throne...”

“... high and lifted up...”

“...the hem of his robe filled the temple...”

“... pivots on the thresholds shook...”

“...the house filled with smoke...”

Isaiah’s is a marvelous description of his vision, and it is often read or preached at ordinations, installations, confirmations, and graduations as well. It is indeed one of the most dramatic and compelling religious experiences described in the Bible. Yet what exactly might it mean for us today?

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Seven hundred years ago, a rabbi wrote of this text:

When a [person] speculates upon...what is *above* [the celestial creatures] and what is *beneath* them, what *preceded* creation and what will happen *thereafter*... [if that person is] not *delicate about the honor of [the] Creator*—it were better...if he had not come into the world.⁵

For us to know with precision what Isaiah saw and experienced just may be among things that we are not really supposed to know.

But we can conclude several things from what Isaiah says of his experience:

Isaiah is overwhelmed with a *sense of awe*.

He is *humbled*.

He is moved to *deep awareness* of his own *sinfulness* – and of the *fallen and fragile nature* of the world.

He is *forgiven* that *sinfulness*.

He is made ready to serve.

And he is *commissioned*: “Here am I’ send me!”

In his vision, Isaiah remains “delicate about the honour of his Creator.”

In these times of ours, Isaiah’s vision reminds me that whether we are living in a time in which our earthly rulers are wise and successful – like Uzziah in the beginning and like some of our Presidents – or whether we are living in a time in which – “our earthly rulers falter, our people drift and die,”⁶ the place we ultimately see the Lord – if “seeing” is even the right word – is “high and lifted up.” Above even the meanness of our politics and partisanship, above our knowledge and our ignorance, above our greatest accomplishments and worst defeats, for us as for Isaiah the Lord remains “high and lifted up.”

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Last week Maggie and I were in New York for the college graduation of Maggie’s great niece.

When Pauline was a child her parents were divorced, and she was raised, along with her younger brother and sister, by her single mother who is a school teacher in Utah.

Her mother early on recognized the potential residing in her firstborn and put all of her energy and what finances she had into giving Pauline the chance to succeed.

Her mother loaded the three kids into the car every summer and brought them East, to Washington, to New York, to museums and libraries and universities and music festivals.

⁵ From Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah. 11b:.

⁶G. K. Chesterton, “O God of Earth and Altar,” 1906.

And Pauline took it all in.

During the four years she was in college, we were Pauline's "home away from home," the couch on which she "plopped" at Thanksgiving until I told her, her first Thanksgiving with us: "Pauline, you are at one of the finest universities in the world. Do not plop on a couch." I never saw her plop again.

Pauline made good grades, explored the city, sang in the college choir, was admitted to every law school to which she applied. Ten days ago we sat in the audience as she joined a thousand other arts and science majors from across the world walk across the stage and receive their bachelor's degree from Columbia University.

That same week...

The family of Doris Abaiweh, whose family came from Cameroon to this country and to this church fifteen years ago, and who have worked and worshipped and supported and been supported by this congregation ever since, took the bus to New York to see their firstborn receive her degree from the New School for Social Research.

And the day after Pauline graduated, across the street at Barnard College, Elizabeth Neureiter, another firstborn of parents in this church who both have and value education, received her degree as well.

I thought of all the youth in this church who over the years have graduated from colleges and universities up and down the Eastern Seaboard and further away as I watched young adults from all over the world celebrating in cap and gown along the streets and sidewalks of New York on which I had walked during seminary. I realized I was in the presence of much of what is "high and lifted up" in our nation:

- The pinnacle of human opportunity
- The pinnacle of human achievement
- The pinnacle of what the open society of our nation offers.

At the same time, I know that I am called to preach a Lord who stands *above* and *beyond* these opportunities, a Lord whom, if we are to see, we must look higher than even these achievements of mind and will and heart with which we have been blessed.

"I saw the Lord," says Isaiah, "sitting on a throne, high and lifted up." Beyond all the we do or experience, suffer or achieve.

IV.

Finally, wherever the place is in which we are fortunate to see the Lord is not a place we are allowed to stay for very long. At the end of his passage, Isaiah hears the voice of the Holy One he sees "high and lifted up" issue a call:

"Whom shall we send?" the voice asks. "Who will go for us?"

"Here am I," says Isaiah. "Send me."

Isaiah is then sent to prophesy to his *own* people and to nations who are sometimes allied *against* his own people.⁷ For the next sixty chapters his prophetic career unfolds, and leads to some of the most eloquent oracles

⁷ Isaiah 6:9-13.

in all of scripture, oracles used to bear witness to the Messiah Christ, oracles we know from Advent and Lent, from Handel's *Messiah*.

Once Isaiah envisions God "high and lifted up," he serves God with pen and voice for several decades on the same earth on which Uzziah ruled, the same earth on which Pearl Harbor and 9/11 would happen, the same earth on which many leaders would meet their ends in less ceremonious ways than Isaiah's Uzziah's quiet death.

"Here am I. Send me."

V.

After the assassination of President Kennedy, a young aide named Daniel Patrick Moynihan said: "...*we will laugh again...[but] we will never be young again.*"⁸

When we have suffered great loss – national or personal – if we can peer *over* our loss and *through* our loss, in time we will catch a glimpse of the Lord "high and lifted up," even if what we see is only "the hem of his garment."

But what we see will be sufficient.

It will lead us to be "delicate about the honour of our Creator," and while we may not be young again, we will laugh again.

Amen.

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⁸ CBS News, "JFK assassination: When a nation coming of age lost its youth," November 17, 2013; available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jfk-assassination-when-a-nation-coming-of-age-lost-its-youth/>.